

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 8 April 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Before we begin the day's business I would like to welcome back Members and make some announcements.

I advise the House that Mr Francie Molloy resigned as a Member of the Assembly with effect from Sunday 7 April 2013. I have been informed by the Chief Electoral Officer that Mr Ian Milne has been returned as a Member for Mid Ulster to fill the vacancy. Mr Milne signed the Roll of Membership in my presence and that of the Clerk to the Assembly/Director General this morning and entered his designation. Mr Milne has taken his seat.

Executive Committee Business

Business Improvement Districts Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that the Business Improvement Districts Bill has received Royal Assent and became law on 21 March 2013. Let us move on.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to seek some clarification regarding declarations of conflict of interest. Whatever ambiguity there may have been about Mr Molloy, his successor in the House is a murderer. Can you —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member knows well that he is well out of order. That is not an issue for the House, and we should move on.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order —

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member —

Mr Allister: I had a point I wanted to make.

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. If he wants to raise it outside the Chamber with me, I am happy to talk to the Member there. Let us move on.

Criminal Justice Bill: Final Stage

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I beg to move

That the Criminal Justice Bill [NIA 10/11-15] do now pass.

I am pleased to present the Final Stage of the Bill to the Assembly, because it contains some important revisions to various aspects of the law. As originally conceived, the Bill dealt only with sex offender notification provisions and the new DNA and fingerprint retention framework. Before it was introduced, however, the need to legislate on human trafficking was identified, additional clauses were introduced, and that proved to be the shape of things to come. Since its introduction, a further four strands have been added, making the finished product a miscellaneous provisions Bill in all but name, though it is still relatively small, with 16 clauses and four schedules.

Before I deal with the content of the Bill, I would like to record my thanks to the many people who have contributed along the way and assisted in shaping and refining it. First and foremost, I thank the Committee for its detailed scrutiny. The Committee began detailed consideration in September and devoted time between then and the Christmas recess to its analysis of the Bill, hearing oral evidence from key interests outside government and producing an extremely detailed report. Before they criticise me on the details of the Bill, I record my formal thanks to Paul Givan as Chair, Raymond McCartney as Deputy Chair and their colleagues for the work that they did. I also record my thanks to the many officials in my Department who contributed to the crafting of the Bill, to the staff of the Assembly who have assisted in its passage and to the Office of the Legislative Counsel, which turned drafting demands around in record time when asked.

Mr Speaker, let me remind the House of the main aspects of the legislation. The first group of clauses deals with the law on sex offender notification. The House will be aware that, three years ago, the Supreme Court ruled that it was unlawful to attach a notification requirement to a sex offender for an indefinite period without any opportunity to review that requirement. The House will also recall that it is not just in the course of this particular Bill that we have debated the issue. I am glad to say, however, that this time we have been able to reach agreement on the detail of the provision. Consequently, the Bill addresses the court's ruling by introducing a system that allows

offenders to apply for a review of indefinite notification periods. Of prime importance as we sought to respond to the ruling was a continuing commitment to protecting the public. I can reassure the House that that commitment remains intact and that the provision in the Bill will not allow sex offenders to escape their requirement to notify in cases where there is still a risk to the public.

We have also used this opportunity to look at other ways in which the law on notification can be made more effective in protecting the public, and the Bill adds a range of strengthening measures to that end. Together with the review mechanism, these provisions represent a rebalancing of focus within the notification regime and will allow for better targeting of resources and effort on where risk is greatest.

Members across the Assembly have united in their condemnation of the abhorrent practice of human trafficking. I share the determination that that evil crime should be allowed no foothold in Northern Ireland. My Department already has in place a range of measures aimed at preventing trafficking, protecting its victims and bringing its perpetrators to justice through the courts. As I have made Members aware at different times, trafficking is a key issue for both the Organised Crime Task Force and the North/South intergovernmental agreement meetings. The provisions made under the Bill will reinforce our stance against this horrific crime. Those measures reflect the seriousness of the crime and echo the Justice Committee's views that the strongest possible legislation should be introduced so that our laws provide a real and effective deterrent to traffickers.

The Bill creates new offences that will allow for prosecution where an individual has been trafficked anywhere outside the United Kingdom by a UK national, a habitual resident of Northern Ireland or a body incorporated under UK law and makes it an offence for an individual who has not previously been trafficked into the United Kingdom to be trafficked internally within it for the purposes of non-sexual exploitation, as is already the case in respect of sexual exploitation. The new offences bring Northern Ireland law into line with the criminal aspects of the EU directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings.

The Bill also provides that all future human trafficking offences will be triable only on indictment in the Crown Court, allowing for a maximum sentence of 14 years' imprisonment. Together, the provisions send a strong signal to

traffickers that that heinous crime will not be tolerated in Northern Ireland.

Responding to concerns expressed by the European Court of Human Rights, the Bill puts in place a new framework for the retention of DNA and fingerprints. The court was specifically concerned with the position of persons suspected but not convicted of an offence, and it concluded that the current regime failed to strike a fair balance between the competing public and private interests. The challenge has been to devise a retention framework that assists in the prevention and detection of crime and the protection of the public while intruding no more than is necessary upon the rights and freedoms of the individual. The Bill replaces the existing indeterminate and indiscriminate retention arrangement with one that distinguishes between those who are convicted and those who are not, between serious and minor offences and between adults and juveniles. In the absence of a conviction, material will be retained only in cases involving serious offences and, even then, for a limited period.

The new framework closely follows arrangements that have been in place for some time in Scotland and are now being introduced in England and Wales. Within the constraints of the European Court judgement, I consider that it strikes the right balance between the competing demands of public protection and civil liberties.

At Consideration Stage, I set out the background to the detention orders used for the small number of children who commit very serious offences, which, in their present form, have been declared incompatible with the ECHR. The Bill requires the court to specify a point at which release on licence should be considered and introduces the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland as the independent judicial element for determining matters of release, licence conditions and recall to custody. Amending the provisions in that way maintains an important sentencing option for the courts, meets our convention obligations, links the detention orders to established provisions for similar orders and strengthens the processes for establishing risk and protecting the public. Crucially, it will also allow us to place the management of the small number of existing cases on a robust and compliant footing.

The new provisions also include transitional arrangements to deal with any relevant cases that could have arisen prior to their commencement. In the event, as there are no

such cases, the transitional arrangements are redundant, and I have noted them for repeal in due course.

The Bill also provides for the examination of an accused person through a registered intermediary. They are communications specialists who will provide a very important service assisting vulnerable victims, witnesses and defendants to communicate their answers more effectively and thus be understood throughout the criminal justice process. The schemes will be piloted in the Crown Court, sitting in Belfast for certain offences, on commencement of the provisions.

An amendment repealing the common law offence of scandalising the court was tabled by the Justice Committee and debated and accepted by the Assembly at Consideration Stage. Again, I thank the Committee for the work that it has undertaken. The amendment repeals the offence of scandalising the court in its entirety and puts the position in Northern Ireland on a par with that in England and Wales.

Having considered the comments made during Consideration Stage, I have asked my officials to take forward work in due course to consider whether the repeal of the offence creates a vacuum and, if it does, whether something needs to be put in its place.

The Assembly also agreed a late amendment at Further Consideration Stage dealing with Sunday courts. The amendment allows Magistrates' Courts to deal with criminal business on Sundays in exceptional circumstances. Members will recall that this was a request brought to me by the Chief Constable as part of the contingency planning process ahead of the G8 conference this coming June.

Were there to be significant public order offences, which have not been entirely unknown around G8 summits, we need to ensure that our police and court systems can operate swiftly and effectively in the eyes of the world. When the G8 was held at Gleneagles eight years ago, there were 350 arrests on the first day alone. Were there to be significant numbers of weekend arrests, we need to ensure that those who are arrested can be brought quickly to court from police cells and that judges can make decisions on remands into prison custody or to grant bail.

I welcome the contributions made in the development of the new provision and for what I referred to as the "quadruple lock". The Chief

Constable, the Lord Chief Justice and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister will all be engaged before the power can be used. That is all part and parcel of ensuring that the power is only deployed when it is truly needed. I have made it clear that this is an exceptional power as part of a contingency plan to cater for potential trouble; there will not be Sunday courts as a matter of routine.

The Criminal Justice Bill makes necessary and important changes across various aspects of our justice system, remedying incompatibilities with the ECHR while strengthening the law in certain important respects. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Givan, the Chair of the Justice Committee, I warn the House that the debate is about the Final Stage of the Bill, whether you are for or against it. It is not about rehearsing or regurgitating the debates that we have already had, especially when it comes to amendments that have not been accepted in the House. I warn all Members that they should try as far as possible to stick to the Final Stage of the Bill.

12.15 pm

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): On behalf of the Committee for Justice, I welcome the Final Stage of the Justice Bill, a Bill not without its difficulties. Petitions of concern were lodged at both Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage, and there is also the matter that was highlighted by the Minister of Justice today regarding the amendments made to change the licensing arrangements relating to the release of young offenders convicted of certain serious crimes and the issue of competence raised by the Attorney General in relation to the transitional measure.

There is no doubt that the Bill has undergone detailed scrutiny and debate both during Committee Stage and the lengthy debates at Consideration Stage and Further Consideration Stage. That has resulted in a large number of amendments being made and some being voted down, one of which I will touch on briefly later. As stated previously, the Bill was essentially viewed by the Committee as a necessity to address issues of compliance. On parts of the Bill, particularly the clause and schedules that bring in a new framework for the retention of fingerprints and DNA profiles, there was a divergence of view that was subsequently reflected by the amendments

debated and voted on during the passage of the Bill.

It is particularly unfortunate that, due to a petition of concern, the prescribed circumstances referred to in article 63D have not been included in the Bill, given the concerns highlighted and the support for that from organisations including the Children's Law Centre, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and NIACRO. When it was raised at Committee Stage, agreement from the Minister to bring forward the necessary amendment was found.

Turning to the human trafficking clauses in the Bill, the Committee is satisfied that the amendments that have been made to ensure that human trafficking offences under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 and the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 and the new offences created by this Bill will be triable on indictment only are justified given the seriousness of the crimes and indicate that Northern Ireland will take the necessary steps to deal properly with the problem. I have no doubt that there is further work to be done to address a range of human trafficking issues, and the Committee will continue to work in this area over the coming months. I note Lord Morrow's attendance for this debate. The Committee looks forward to receiving the private Member's Bill on this issue. Many of us on the Committee believe that that Bill will ultimately provide the best protection in dealing with this very serious offence.

The Committee sought the support of the Assembly for the amendment to abolish the offence of scandalising the judiciary. At Consideration Stage, I set out at some length the background to and reasons for the amendment. Abolishing the offence in Northern Ireland is the right thing to do. The Committee very much welcomed the support received from around the House to bring it about. During that debate and as we have taken it forward, it has shown the Assembly the importance and power that a Committee has in taking on an issue and bringing forward legislation to tackle something that can attract consensus in the House. The Committee has been able to achieve that on this issue. I caution the Minister about now creating a loophole through the abolition of the offence. I am wary of the indications, and we will look closely at what the Department may bring forward in this respect. What I am clear on is that our judges should not be treated any differently from how judges are treated right across the United Kingdom. That is the test

that I will apply if the Minister decides to bring anything forward in respect of that issue.

I thank all the Committee members for their commitment and diligence in carrying out the scrutiny of the Bill. I also thank the Committee staff, who carry out a lot of work on behalf of members. When we have had particular questions and issues, they have been very studious and incredibly professional in going about their work. In my view, they provide a very professional service to Committee members to ensure that we are able to do our job properly on behalf of the people who elect us. I extend those thanks to the Department's officials who, on every request, were able to provide us with information. It was not always information that some of us wanted to hear, but nevertheless they provided us with information in a timely form. On behalf of the Committee, I express my appreciation to the Department and the Minister for that co-operation. Final thanks go to those who responded to the Committee by providing the written and oral information that we sought. I thank them for their engagement with the Committee, which ensured that we were able to scrutinise the Bill properly.

I will speak briefly as an individual Member of the Assembly. I take on board the Speaker's earlier point and will certainly not regurgitate this particular point. However, it is important to note at Final Stage that this was a missed opportunity to deal with a serious issue: the sensitive matter of abortion. The amendment that was tabled by Alban Maginness, along with others in this place and me, would have addressed that very serious issue, but others chose to veto the amendment. They have to deal with that and explain themselves to those who ask why they did that.

It is an issue for the Minister, who indicated during that debate that it was a criminal justice matter. I know that the Health Minister has written to him seeking a meeting on the back of the vote that took place, which clearly demonstrated where the majority of Members are on the issue. It is for the Minister to take it forward and take the will of the Assembly forward. If that requires public consultation, we have the fairer, faster justice Bill, which is an opportunity for the Minister to address the issue. I look forward to his engagement with the Health Minister. I trust that the Minister will give that the same urgency and vigour that he gave to opposing the amendment that was tabled by Alban Maginness and me so that we can finally deal with something that, for a lot of people in Northern Ireland, needs to be dealt with as a matter of urgency.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I echo the Chair's comments, particularly those on the Committee staff's work in steering the Committee through the legislation and the contribution of the departmental officials and the many people who gave evidence. For some elements of the media, it would be useful to lay out the amount of work that has gone into taking the Bill forward, because we are sometimes criticised for not dealing with legislation. In many ways, this legislation went through a lot of scrutiny and debate, and people obviously had different positions on it.

There were three main planks to the Bill, two of which we had no issue with at all. Matters around sexual offenders and human trafficking were teased out, which we very much welcomed. Unfortunately, we found ourselves against major aspects of the legislation in relation to the retention of DNA and fingerprints and, to some degree, the issue of photographs. At Consideration Stage and throughout Committee Stage, we laid out the template for testing the legislation, which was based on the presumption of innocence. We said that there were aspects of the Bill that ignored that principle and that there were situations in which someone who was not charged with an offence could have their DNA retained indefinitely. We felt that that was the complete antithesis of the presumption of innocence, and in no way was that issue addressed. So, we have a major concern about that. Indeed, as a result, we cannot support the Bill, even though there are, as I said, major elements that we support concerning sexual offenders and human trafficking. We cannot lend our voice in support of a Bill that in many ways undermines the presumption of innocence.

We also asked whether the legislation on the retention of DNA, fingerprints and other aspects would pass a test in the European Court of Human Rights, which is why the legislation had to be enacted. The Minister addressed that in some way but not to our satisfaction. We believe — we see it happening in other jurisdictions — that, sometimes, when there is a ruling from the European Court, there is a tendency to buy a bit of time by saying, "How do we raise the standard in the area in which the court has found a flaw to a position that will cover us until another case is taken?". When another case is taken — I predict that, in this instance, a case will be taken on aspects of this Bill — it will maybe take six to eight years before it goes through the process of reaching the Court of Human Rights. We will then find ourselves in the position where we say, "We got that wrong". I cautioned against that at

Consideration Stage, and I do so again. In the past, we could have blamed other legislatures or other people for framing bad law, but the responsibility now falls on the Assembly, and we cannot, in the future, say that we got it wrong despite people giving us advice to the contrary. In my opinion, the principle of the presumption of innocence should guide us, but, in this instance, it has not guided us. I think that it is accepted, and I do not think that anybody, even the Minister, will argue that there is not a problem with situations where a person has not faced charges, never mind acquittal or what follows. That is wrong, and it is a form of discrimination. I do not think that we can allow ourselves to lend our support to something that we feel is flawed, undermines the principle of the presumption of innocence and is discriminatory.

We may be able to take lessons from previous legislation, and that is perhaps something to bear in mind in the future with criminal justice matters. We know that we were under some pressure to deal with aspects of the Bill, but that puts us in a position, because we cannot support one part of the Bill even if other parts are completely separate. There is no relationship between human trafficking, sexual offenders and DNA, and when they are run together, you find yourself in the position —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: I will indeed.

Mr Givan: Can the Member put this very clearly on the record: is he telling us that he will divide the House and vote against the Bill at Final Stage?

Mr McCartney: Yes, we will divide. We believe that we cannot lend our support to or even be silent in framing legislation that undermines the presumption of innocence. We do that despite the fact that we support other aspects of the Bill. Throughout the Bill's passage, in Committee Stage and during the debates, we took the position that we support aspects of it totally and absolutely. However, on the presumption of innocence, because there is no opt-out, we cannot say that we support 90% of the Bill but not the other 10%. You will have seen that throughout the Committee Stage. People might say tomorrow, "You had your chance to vote against something that undermines the principle of the presumption of innocence and you didn't". Therefore, that is why we find —

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Campbell: The Member said that he believed that cases may proceed to the European Court of Human Rights. Is part of the reason for Sinn Féin voting against the Bill based on a belief that people might take a case to the European Court of Human Rights?

Mr McCartney: No, it is not. I used that as an example. At Consideration Stage, I outlined why I felt that that was the case. To me, there is an inbuilt defect in the legislation, and it practically invites a case from someone who feels that the presumption of innocence is undermined. In many ways, I accept that I am making an assumption, but it is an assumption based on the fact that someone has already taken a case. There is a case already in the courts where someone feels that their DNA has been retained, despite the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights.

So, it is not that I am hoping that someone will take a case; I am basing it on the fact that the presumption of innocence is undermined where someone has been arrested and not charged. The case has been well highlighted. There have been a number of cases where the police have told people that they are totally and absolutely innocent and that they should not have been arrested in the first instance. However, aspects of the Bill will ensure that their DNA is retained, and I do not think that that is fair. So, that is the basis on which I say that someone will take a case in the future. Therefore, to respond to the Chair's question, we cannot vote for the Bill because we would be saying that it is OK to disregard our position on the presumption of innocence.

12.30 pm

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. It is useful that we get a full grasp of why the party opposite is taking its position. Does the Member not accept that, having gone through a variety of stages, you get some things that you want and some you do not? Not everyone on this side of the House will be able to say that we think that the Bill is 100% right in every aspect. We have amended it to a point on a number of issues where we are satisfied, but not necessarily to the same test that Sinn Féin seems to want to apply on this issue. If we were to take the approach that Sinn Féin is taking, given that we are the two largest parties that are, ultimately, in control of the Executive, this Bill would fall. Is there not an onus on the party opposite, as the leading nationalist party in the Executive, to recognise that, when you do

not get everything, you still, ultimately, have a responsibility to govern for the greater good and ensure that the Executive are operating? If we were to take the approach that the party opposite is taking by reflecting on our position in the course of this debate and applying the same test as Sinn Féin, this Bill would not get through.

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

Mr McCartney: I agree with parts of what you are saying. There are times when you may not get totally and absolutely what you want from a Bill, but there are matters of principle. When the Bill went through previously, there were aspects that you could not live with to do with sexual offenders, and you used a petition of concern. I might have issues around using a petition of concern, but I do not think that you can say that we will sell ourselves a bit short on a point of principle. If you find yourselves comfortable with the Bill, albeit that there are aspects that you do not agree with but which do not undermine what you believe are principles, that is fine. I am sure that we have taken the same position on other pieces of legislation, but this is fundamental. Indeed, if you were to follow the commentary from the introduction of the Bill through every stage, you could stand up tomorrow and say that we said throughout the process that presumption of innocence was our template, yet we voted for the Bill. If so, I would have a harder case to defend than I feel I am defending now.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Given what the Member has just said, was the appalling decision that your party and the SDLP took collectively to lodge a petition of concern on the National Crime Agency not a point of principle? Was that just politics?

Mr McCartney: Absolutely not. In many ways, you are making the point for me. We voted against the NCA on a point of principle. As we said throughout that debate, and as is on the record, the point of principle is that one of the pillars that allowed policing to progress to the position that it is in in the North was the issue of accountability. In our opinion, the NCA was not going to be as equally accountable as all other police officers serving in the North. That, to us, was a principle, and that is the principle on which we opposed the NCA.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Humphrey: What you said in response to my intervention undermines that entirely. It was not about a point of principle, because the petition of concern that you and the SDLP lodged totally undermines your point.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that we are not dealing with a previous debate. I ask Members to concentrate on the matter before us.

Mr McCartney: Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker, for that guidance. I will make the broad point that, when you defend a principle, you take whatever measures possible to defend it. If someone had wanted to sign a petition of concern on this aspect, we might have found ourselves in a position to agree. Accountability is key to policing in the North. We would not lend our support to anything that undermines the principle of accountability. Much in the same way, we will not support anything that undermines the presumption of innocence. That is where we find ourselves today.

Mr A Maginness: Like other Members, I thank the Committee for its work on the Bill. I also thank the departmental officials for their work in co-operation with the Committee. It is a good example of the Executive and the Assembly working together on a serious piece of legislation.

As other Members have already said, there is much consensus on the Bill, in particular the provisions dealing with sex offenders. That is something that arose out of a judicial decision, and that has been, in our view, properly addressed. Also, the human trafficking aspect of the Bill was rightly and properly brought to the House, properly debated and properly looked at. Of course, we give our full support to that.

The initiative by the Committee in dealing with the judiciary and the whole issue raised by the Hain case — scandalising the judiciary — was a right and proper initiative and one that reflected, I believe, the unhappiness in the public mind in relation to the Hain case. It was right and proper that we, as a Committee, took the initiative and dealt with that. That shows the value of having the Committee and the value of the Committee being able to take its own initiative independently of the Executive and the Department. It was the right position for the Committee to adopt. Of course, we are very supportive of that.

The issue of the retention of fingerprints and DNA arises out of the Marper case — the 2008

European Court ruling — and has seen most contention within the Bill. It is something that has divided the House on previous occasions. I think that it is innately unfair, where someone is cautioned or innocent — in other words, not convicted of any offence — for that person to be subject to the same rigours as, effectively, somebody who has been found guilty in a court. That creates an equivalence, which I believe is unacceptable. It is a matter of regret that we in the SDLP cannot support that aspect of the Bill. Of course, we have made that plain on previous occasions when those matters have been raised in the Assembly and in Committee.

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. There are two points that I would like to hear his comments on. Is he telling the House today that the SDLP is in favour of the retention of DNA where a person has gone through due process and been convicted in court? Does he welcome what we have been told here today? The Chair of the Committee opened up the debate, and we thank him very much for doing that, in relation to abortion. There was a great debate here when the Member's party and my party came together to take that matter through. However, we were opposed right, left and centre, not least by the opposition pioneered by the Department of Justice, which all the time the Minister contended this was not a matter for. Now we learn that it is. Perhaps the Minister, when he is speaking, will tell us whether he was misled in relation to that particular matter and whether the advice that he was given was not the correct advice. It seems to me that he now acknowledges something different today.

Mr A Maginness: I thank Lord Morrow for his interesting intervention. Perhaps I could deal with it later and complete the point that I am making in relation to the retention of DNA and fingerprints.

It is not simply a matter of academic concern. There is an actual hurt to or impact on the individual when this happens. If the individual is innocent and is, perhaps, simply being cautioned, it affects him or her. It is important that we bear that in mind.

I turn to the point that Lord Morrow raised in relation to someone who has been convicted. Yes, there should be retention; yes, the case of *S and Marper v the United Kingdom* dealt with that. What the Marper judgement said, essentially, was that there should not be blanket or indiscriminate retention. My party supports that view, and we believe that a balance should be struck between those who are convicted of offences and those who are

effectively innocent. I speculate that Lord Morrow might say that, in being cautioned, people admit to a certain offending, but, nonetheless, this takes away from the effectiveness of cautioning if retention is a consequence of it. Retention would not be a consequence of it in a great number of cases because, in a great number of cases, retention of DNA and fingerprints would not take place in any event. Therefore, my party is not supportive of those provisions as they stand in this, the final form of the Bill, and, regrettably, we cannot vote for them.

In relation to the matter raised by the Chairperson of the Committee and yourself, Lord Morrow — namely the abortion amendment brought forward by Mr Givan and supported by me and others in the Assembly — that was a missed opportunity. The House was deprived of the opportunity to deal effectively and in a reasonable and reasoned fashion with a private institution working outside the health service. I will not go into the detail of that, and I am sure that the Deputy Speaker would not permit me to do so. However, I emphasise the point that Mr Givan made: this was a missed opportunity. I deeply regret that. Many thousands of people share that regret. The petition of concern was a very blunt instrument to be used in such circumstances. Those who used it will have to explain that to the public. I cannot think of any reasonable explanation in relation to the usage of that petition of concern. *[Interruption.]* Does the Member wish to make an intervention?

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. We know that the Minister is to the far left on these issues, and his Department, obviously, seems to be further to the left. I am sure that Mr Maginness agrees with me that it takes some distance to get even further to the left than his own party. In relation to the matter, Sinn Féin, at the time, obviously referred to some principle that none of us could understand. It reminds me of the person who said, "These are my principles; however, if you do not like them, I have others that I can show you." So I suspect that the principles that Sinn Féin Members were talking about were the other principles.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the question before us today and draw them back to today's decision.

12.45 pm

Mr A Maginness: Of course, Mr Deputy Speaker. To conclude on the particular point

that has been raised, I have to emphasise that it was a wasted opportunity. I regret the fact that things turned out the way that they did, but there is recognition that this is a criminal justice issue. If it is a criminal justice issue, I believe that it should be addressed expeditiously by the Department, and I look forward to that in the near future. I believe that other issues that were raised at the time of the amendment were spurious, and I do not think that they were of any great substance whatsoever.

In conclusion, the substance of the Bill is acceptable to the SDLP, but I have indicated that we cannot fully support what the Minister has put forward with regard to the retention of DNA and fingerprints. Therefore, it is very difficult for us to support that.

Mr Elliott: I add my thanks to all the staff involved at every stage in bringing this forward, whether that was the Justice Committee staff or the staff from the Department. They were always very helpful to us when we asked questions, and they were always very quick to respond to our queries.

I am concerned to hear that one party has clearly indicated that it is voting against the Bill, and the SDLP appears to be falling into line and suggesting that it may vote against it. It brings an element of surprise, because we scrutinised the Bill very closely, as others have suggested. We do not want to be soft on crime or soft on criminals.

Maybe the Bill is not all that I would want it to be either. There were certain aspects of it that I would have liked to have seen included that would have strengthened it even more. However, I am confident that it is at least strengthening certain aspects of the law as far as criminal justice goes, particularly around sexual exploitation, human trafficking, DNA and fingerprints. We need to hear the reason why Sinn Féin and the SDLP are not supporting it. Is it because it will strengthen the law on some of those issues? Are they weak on the law? Are they weak on the protection of the citizens of Northern Ireland? Maybe that is why they are not supporting it. I have grave concerns about that, Mr Deputy Speaker. In this legislative place, we should all help to protect the public.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. He will be aware of the dreadful scenes last week at the Easter parade in Ardoyne where children as young as five years of age took part in an appalling parade dressed in paramilitary garb. Sinn Féin, of course, cannot

say anything about that because it has been putting children on the streets —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to return to today's debate.

Mr Humphrey: Yes, I am coming to that. The reality is that Sinn Féin said nothing and the SDLP said little or nothing on the issue of child protection and child abuse, and that was child abuse.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for his intervention. We are all aware of those situations — dire situations in many instances — where children are used and abused.

To come back to the debate on the legislation, I welcome the fact that we are bringing forward the Criminal Justice Bill, and, as I said earlier, I would have liked the Minister and the Department to put even more strengthening measures into it, but we are left with what we have. We arrived at compromises, and I thought that compromises were what this place was about in many instances. However, that just goes to prove some of the republican mentality: you grab what you can when you can; you pocket what you can when you can; and, in the end, it is not enough. You have to come back looking for more. That is unfortunate when we want to bring forward a legislative process and legislation that will help to protect the public. For goodness' sake, why would you oppose this Bill, particularly around aspects relating to human trafficking and sexual exploitation? There are other measures to bring forward the aspects that you want, and I know that we will look to bring forward other aspects of criminal justice through other Bills and measures, but to oppose this is downright selfishness. It is based on personalities, and it is just the old republican mentality.

Mr McCarthy: I am pleased to speak at the Final Stage of this Bill. It is very encouraging that we are passing yet another piece of justice legislation. Since the devolution of policing and justice, our Minister has been keen to identify local solutions to local needs, to develop partnership working across government and wider society and to reshape our justice system to build a safer Northern Ireland for everyone. Those values and objectives are encapsulated in this Bill.

I turn to the context. Changes had to be made to the sex offender notification requirements as a result of a Supreme Court ruling. Throughout the detailed debate and deliberations during the progress of the Bill, the primary motivation of all

involved has been to protect the public and to ensure that greater protections are in place against the risk of sex offenders reoffending. While meeting our obligations under the court ruling, the Bill also adds a number of strengthening measures that are very much welcome. In particular, new notification requirements for travel within the UK will provide the police with more useful information to prevent crime and to protect the public. I commend the Department and the Minister for working closely with the police and other key stakeholders on those issues to ensure that we have a robust and effective piece of legislation in place.

I turn to the measures on human trafficking. Every person is of equal worth, and each citizen is a foundation stone of a democratic society. Our institutions depend on, and must uphold, human rights. Unfortunately, many people have had, and continue to have, their rights assaulted by traffickers. This Assembly has rightly expressed its disgust at these crimes. We take action to enhance deterrents and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice and receive appropriate punishment for their offences. The new offences created by this Bill will strengthen our efforts in that regard, as will the measure that all trafficking offences be tried on indictment in a Crown Court. We are sending out a clear signal that these crimes will not be accepted in Northern Ireland.

I also want to mention the new framework that we are putting in place for the retention of DNA and fingerprints. This has been a difficult issue, but I believe that what we have agreed provides appropriate protection to the public, while ensuring that the rights of the individuals are not unnecessarily interfered with. This framework creates appropriate distinctions between adults and juveniles, serious and minor offences and those who are and are not convicted. There are many areas where the issue of public protection versus civil liberties is raised. I believe that we have struck the right balance in this case.

The Bill, as a whole, introduces a number of necessary and important changes and, ultimately, strengthens our justice system here in Northern Ireland. I congratulate Mr Ford, who is the first Justice Minister that Northern Ireland has had for many years, and his Department for their dedicated work in reaching the Final Stage of the Criminal Justice Bill. I encourage the Assembly to support the Bill.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas

leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for being with us and seeing us through the Bill today.

The Criminal Justice Bill is concerned largely with updating legislation to ensure that it meets current standards on human rights as set out by UK Supreme Court rulings, the European Court of Human Rights and the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. These are challenging issues, and Members have questioned whether some of the measures being put in place were too lenient. In some instances, amendments to the Bill strengthened measures to alleviate those concerns.

Once again, it is important to remember that we are legislating to protect the rights of individuals. As such, it is essential that if we are to err on one side, we err in favour of the individual over and above the state. As a member of the Committee for Justice, I listened carefully to the evidence presented to the Committee on the issues that the Bill is designed to address. I remain sceptical that the Bill strikes the right balance on protecting the rights of the individual.

I am content that the measures in the Bill meet the requirements of EU directives on human trafficking and that we are obliged to implement them. Similarly, the measures on sex offender notification, and the right to a review in the case of offenders subject to notification for an indefinite period, follows on from a UK Supreme Court ruling on compliance with European Court of Human Rights obligations.

On the issue of retention of DNA and other biometric material, however, I remain greatly concerned at the level of disregard to the rights of the individual demonstrated by some of the Bill's proposals. In his evidence to the Committee, Professor Michael O'Flaherty of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission made an important point:

"The issue is that your DNA profile is your private property. It is who you are. Unless you have committed a crime or there is some other reasonable reason for the state to interfere ... in normal circumstances your DNA profile belongs to you and it is nobody else's business. That is the essence of the right to privacy. It is the same as your house. We recognise that the police, in certain circumstances, have every entitlement to come into your house, but they do not have an open invitation to go in and out your front door."

When we legislate, we should take great care not to infringe on such fundamental rights. The measures that relate to the retention of fingerprints and DNA profiles result from a 2008 European Court of Human Rights ruling that the blanket and indiscriminate —

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. His party brought forward an amendment at an early stage on the issue of DNA, and I think that that was approved and accepted. What has caused the change of heart at this stage? They seem now to support the other aspects, so why the change of heart now that they are opposing the Bill in principle?

Mr McGlone: We accept that as an improvement. Nonetheless, I have every right to make a strong case here today around those fundamental and strong points. I will continue on those issues.

The measures that relate to the retention of fingerprints and DNA profiles result from a 2008 European Court of Human Rights ruling that the blanket and indiscriminate nature of the power of retention in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was in breach of article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which is about the right to privacy and family life.

The UK regions were found to be the only countries or regions in the Council of Europe to permit the systematic and indefinite retention of DNA profiles and samples from persons who were acquitted or when criminal proceedings were not proceeded with. The new measures seek to specify in what circumstances and for how long biometric material, fingerprints, etc, can be retained. To use Professor O'Flaherty's analogy: when the police can legally enter your house.

After hearing the evidence to the Committee, I remain unconvinced that it is appropriate to allow the retention of fingerprints and DNA profiles of someone who, although arrested, was not charged with a serious offence, or, if charged with a serious offence, was found not guilty by the courts. Even if the qualifying offences for that retention of biometric material were deemed serious, broadly covering serious violent, sexual or terrorist offences, it is not relevant. If someone has been found not guilty by the courts, they should have the right to be treated by the state as innocent of that crime. If, at the conclusion of the investigation by the police, no charges are brought against an individual, they should also have the right to be treated by the state as innocent of that crime. However, the measures in the Bill do not do that.

1.00 pm

During earlier Committee meetings, Department of Justice officials defended that retention because:

"there was, at some point prior to acquittal, for example, sufficient suspicion of an individual."

I still find that argument unconvincing. I have no problem accepting the need to take the protection of the public into account, but, if we are to compromise the rights of the individual to do so, it should be on a more simple case than mere suspicion, particularly where that suspicion has been tested in the courts and found to be without foundation.

The fact that recordable offences qualify an individual's biometric detail for retention is also a concern. A situation could occur where someone winds up in jail for defaulting on their electricity bill payments, and, as set out by the Bill, their DNA and fingerprints could be retained for three years with the availability of an extension of two years on application to the courts. How can that conceivably be in the public interest?

I also have grave reservations about how the proposals will impact on children and younger people who are alleged to have committed criminal offences or who are recognised as having done so. Their reintegration into society will be made more difficult by the stigmatising effect on the children and young people whose DNA and fingerprints will be retained. In fact, it is conceivable that, in some cases, they will be retained indefinitely.

The fact that there is the potential for the fingerprints and DNA of a child who has received their first caution — I emphasise first caution — to be retained for five years should cause Members to reflect on the disproportionate nature of the proposals. It is simply not proportionate to retain fingerprints and DNA following the conviction of children and young people for minor offences. In the case of the Bill, I am not concerned that we are merely matching legislation in other jurisdictions. Rather, we should be setting our own standards when it comes to human rights, and they should be the highest possible standards.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I am just finished, but OK.

Mr Givan: That is why I got in when I did. I appreciate your giving way. I also appreciate the rationale that this Member, at least, has decided to give to the House to explain the position.

I obviously disagree with the Member's viewpoint on the matter, but if this is a fundamental principle on the presumption of innocence, can he advise me and the House whether Sinn Féin presented the SDLP with a petition of concern to veto this? Did it attempt to veto this at the Executive? It could have done so, if the presumption of innocence is such a fundamental principle. The majority of the House will pass something, which, ultimately, Members on the opposite Benches could have vetoed if they had chosen to do so.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am not aware of any petition of concern whatsoever on this. I am certainly not aware of anything that has happened at the Executive or at that level to stymie it, hold it up or amend it in any way.

I thank you for your intervention. I have been able to shed some light on it, and I have concluded my remarks. I was about to conclude my remarks, but I am sure that it is on record now.

Mr Allister: I will vote for the Final Stage of the Bill, not because I endorse every jot and tittle of it, but because the overall principles and what it seeks to do, particularly on trafficking, although I do not think it goes far enough in that regard, and some sexual offences, are matters for which our legislation requires the strengthening that the Bill brings.

I have reservations. I have a reservation about the issue that Mr Alban Maginness raised concerning the fact that one of the consequences of the small print of the Bill is that, when it comes to the retention of DNA, someone who is deemed to be innocent of an offence will be treated in an equivalent manner to someone who is convicted of a serious offence. There is an issue there that sits uncomfortably with many of the principles that some of us hold.

That said, other elements of the Bill require me to vote for it. Therefore, I will. I will vote for the Bill in spite of the fact that it is deficient in respect of what it does not contain. The House spurned the opportunity to make it a timely and relevant piece of legislation on an issue of public concern, namely that which affects the operation of the Marie Stopes clinic. It is one of the ironies — indeed, one of the perversities —

of this House that, although it was the will of the greater number of Members that the Bill should have tackled that issue, by reason of the perverse use of the perverse instrument that is a petition of concern, the undemocratic quirk that results is that the greater number in the House who wanted to see that dealt with were thwarted. The Bill is much the weaker and less relevant for that. I regret that very much.

I look forward to hearing what the Minister eventually says about how he anticipates, if at all, dealing with that issue and the obvious lacuna in the law that permits the Marie Stopes clinic to operate with impunity in Northern Ireland. The Minister tells us that he will examine that. We look forward to hearing about that.

I also have reservations about the clause on Sunday courts. In the debate at Further Consideration Stage, I heard no compelling justification for it. I certainly heard no compelling justification for the lack of a sunset clause. If it were but a temporary emergency requirement to deal with the possibilities of the G8 summit, why was there not a proper sunset clause? The Minister tells us that there is a quadruple lock. Well, some of us have come across multiple locks in the past. I do not know whether a quadruple lock will prove to be any more effective than a triple lock. I would certainly be less than persuaded, given the track record of triple locks, that a quadruple lock would be any better in this regard.

I will vote for the Bill. I note that Sinn Féin, of course, as the Chairman pointed out, did not, it seems, discover its principles — if one wants to call them that — sufficiently at the Executive to block the Bill. Today, however, it has discovered something that it can pass under that guise. Today, it will vote against the Bill. Perhaps it is no surprise, on a day when it has added a murderer to its ranks in the House, that it will vote against a justice Bill.

Mrs O'Neill: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is a totally disgusting remark for that Member to make about another Member of the House. Mr Deputy Speaker, you should rule on that at this moment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The matter will be brought to the Speaker's attention.

Mr Allister: I rise to speak the truth. Mr Milne is a convicted murderer. I will not be silenced from saying that he is a convicted murderer. He may not want to admit that. However, that is what he is.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask the Member to return to the Bill, please.

Mr Allister: I will conclude with my observation that the circumstances in which Sinn Féin will oppose the Bill today —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Givan: On that point, does the Member agree with me — I am sure that he will — that it is somewhat perverse that, on the fundamental principle of the presumption of innocence, which is the basis on which Sinn Féin will vote against the Bill, it did not use its veto to block the legislation when it used the very same mechanism to block an amendment that would have protected women and the unborn child?

Mr Allister: I am sure that it will not be lost on many that, when it came to protecting the unborn and giving a voice and protection to those who have no voice, Sinn Féin in the House neutered the Bill through a petition of concern. It was Sinn Féin in the House —

Mr Wells: And the Alliance Party.

Mr Allister: And the Alliance Party.

They ensured that the unborn remain voiceless and that their destruction remains possible within the ambits that were being sought to be addressed. That is no great surprise to me, given the moral ambivalence of that party — Sinn Féin — on all things touching upon the right to life.

Mr Ford: I must confess that I did not expect to be responding so early in the debate, given the interest shown by the small numbers who have participated. It appeared to me that, aside from the universal praise for Committee members and their staff and almost universal praise for my staff in the Department of Justice, there was not a great deal of meeting of minds around a couple of key issues. If you will permit me, let me briefly touch on the issue of abortion, since that issue was raised and Members were allowed to raise it. I have always acknowledged that there are both justice and health issues in relation to abortion. That is why, before we got to Further Consideration Stage, I indicated that I would take a paper to the Executive to consider how we deal with the matter. My officials engaged with officials from the Health Department over the consultation paper that the Health Minister

prepared. As the Chair said, the Health Minister wrote to me. Indeed, our messages crossed in the post. So, there will be continuing discussions between our two Departments with a view to taking proposals to the Executive. So we will see where that goes. What is needed, frankly, is a joined-up approach that recognises the justice and health aspects of dealing with the difficult and, indeed, traumatic issue of abortion.

On the specific —

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Minister giving way and the clarity that he is bringing on this point.

In taking this forward, will he take cognisance of the will of the House in the vote taken on the detail in the amendment that was brought forward by myself, Alban Maginness and others in the Assembly as the foundation upon which proposals to the Executive should be based?

Mr Ford: I am grateful for the Member's point. I will certainly take cognisance of what was said. I have to say that I opposed that amendment because of advice given to me by officials acting on the basis of the best evidence they had and of the legal knowledge available to the Department about the difficulties that would have arisen from that amendment. Although Lord Morrow is quite permitted to characterise me as being on the far left — though I suspect some of my Trotskyist friends might dispute that — or as anything else he wishes, I think that it is grossly unfair that officials doing their duty and giving the best advice they can give are characterised in a similar way.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ford: Yes.

Mr Wells: I am interested in what the Member said. If, at a later stage, there is proper consultation on an amendment to a future justice Bill, and his officials state to him very clearly that it is properly worded and is, therefore, competent, will he prevent one of his Back-Benchers, Mrs Lo, from coming forward to sign a second petition of concern to block that if it has been done properly in his mind and that of his officials?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Minister, before he responds to the Member, to perhaps briefly respond to him and then come back to the Bill. I am trying to encourage Members and the Minister to deal with the decision in front of us today.

Mr Ford: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was attempting to briefly deal with some of the points made during the debate.

First, I do wish that Mr Wells would learn to address my colleague as Ms Lo, not Mrs Lo.

Secondly, one of the great virtues of leading a liberal party is that one allows one's colleagues to have their rights of conscience. I do not direct my colleagues as to how to behave.

I will go — as I am sure you would wish me to, Mr Deputy Speaker — to the key issue that occupied much of the debate and resulted in disagreement across the Chamber: the biometric issue and the retention of DNA and fingerprints. I am somewhat concerned that representation has been made by some Members on the interpretation of the presumption of innocence question that is significantly beyond the position taken by the European Court of Human Rights in the *Marper* judgement. Let me deal with some of the points that have been raised by Mr McCartney, Mr Maginness and Mr McGlone.

1.15 pm

Although it is absolutely clear that, in the *Marper* judgement of 2008, the European Court of Human Rights criticised the indefinite retention of material from those who had been arrested but not convicted, it did not say that there should be no such retention of material. That appears to be the position that has been taken by nationalist colleagues. It is not that there should be no retention. In the *Marper* case, the court specifically highlighted that, in the way that the Scottish legislation operates, some retention of material for limited periods should be acceptable in certain circumstances.

For the benefit of the House, I will read paragraphs 109 and 110 of the *Marper* judgement, which state:

"the Scottish Parliament voted to allow retention of the DNA of unconvicted persons only in the case of...violent or sexual offences and even then, for three years only, with the possibility of an extension to keep the DNA sample and data for a further two years with the consent of a sheriff... This position is notably consistent with Committee of Ministers' Recommendation R(92)1, which stresses the need for an approach which discriminates between different kinds of cases and for the application of strictly defined storage periods for data, even in more serious cases."

Clearly, therefore, the court envisaged the retention of material from unconvicted persons in certain circumstances and did not see that as contrary to the presumption of innocence.

The judgement also made the point in paragraph 122 that:

"retention of the applicants' private data cannot be equated with the voicing of suspicions."

Although Mr McGlone quoted the view given to the Committee by Professor Michael O'Flaherty of the Human Rights Commission, it was also the case that, in the evidence presented the Human Rights Commission, there was no human rights argument to take a different approach from that which is set out in the Bill. That is based on the fact that research clearly indicates that those who have been arrested but not convicted have a significantly higher risk of being convicted of a future offence than otherwise similar individuals who have not been arrested and that the risk does not run down to the same level as the general population until between three and five years have elapsed. That is the basis on which Scottish law and the law that is proposed in this Bill operates. It is a reasonable retention period of three years that is extendable to five years on application to the courts. The direct equivalent of application to the sheriff, as cited in the *Marper* judgement, is proposed for individuals who have been arrested for, but not convicted of, serious violent and sexual offences.

This is not something to do with a default on an electricity account. Indeed, as I understand it, that is a civil wrong rather than a criminal issue — I think that we need to be careful with the examples that we use. This is about people who have been arrested for serious violence or sexual offences, and the House needs to take serious account of the clear evidence of the protection that is afforded by doing that.

Retention does not reflect on the innocence of an individual or the offence for which they were arrested but on the fact that they are, for the time being, part of a group that is at higher risk of future offending. That is the basis of the public protection that is included in this. If conviction is not the outcome, only in cases of serious offences will the material be retained and only for a limited time without extension by court approval. Retention involving cases where there has been an arrest but no charge will require independent consent. So, there is a clear distinction between those who have been convicted and those who have not. It is not correct to suggest anything else, and those who

have done so are not interpreting the legislation as it is.

The database does not convict people, and there is always a presumption of innocence. The database does, however, present the opportunity for an investigative lead that can be pursued by the police where appropriate. The Department has been advised by the PSNI that there are roughly 700 DNA matches in Northern Ireland every year. That is 700 investigation leads for serious offences for the police to pursue that they would not otherwise have had. Members need to take serious account of that if they are talking about protecting the public. It does not go against a presumption of innocence, but it does, potentially, provide an opportunity for things to be followed through.

Similarly, the Bill provides that young people who are convicted of a first minor offence will have their data retained for an individually tailored period of between five and 10 years because of the realities of juvenile offending. So let us be clear: this is not a blanket presumption against innocence; this is a way in which we can seek the best level of public protection, recognising individuals' human rights but also ensuring that we make use of the opportunities that we have from the biometric retention framework.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ford: Certainly.

Mr Givan: On this point, I agree with the Minister. Indeed, some would argue, and I am one of them, that we would be quite happy to have the indefinite retention of data of those arrested for the type of offences that the Minister outlined. In that respect, I argue that the Bill does not go far enough, but I have to take into account the European Court ruling on the matter. Given that the Minister provided the information that 700 leads came from DNA being retained, would those whose particular approach is to oppose this part of the legislation not be placing the public in grave danger should the Assembly follow the arguments outlined by some Members?

Mr Ford: It is always nice to be able to agree, at least temporarily, with the Chair of the Committee, who highlights the public protection arguments. I suspect that Mr Givan and I would disagree slightly: I happen to believe that the legislation gets the balance right and coincides with the European Court ruling; his position is, I believe, that it coincides with the European Court ruling but that he would wish the retention

framework to be stricter. However, we can agree that what we have is in compliance with our legal obligations. There is no evidence from the Marper judgement to suggest that what is being proposed in this Bill, which I trust that the House will pass within a few minutes, is in any way at variance with that judgement.

Mr McCartney suggested that this might be merely buying time until the next case comes along. If I believed that that was the case, I would not be proposing this legislation. I believe that this legislation is right, that it is compliant with the Marper judgement and that it is unchallengeable. It will go through and continue to be the stated position because I would not have been interested in producing legislation merely to plug some hole for a while until a further case comes along. On the basis of the evidence that I have been shown, I believe that this is the correct judgement and that it creates a balanced Bill. I commend the Bill to the House as one that should become law as soon after today as Royal Assent is granted.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 58; Noes 38.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy.

NOES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms

Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Ms McCorley.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Criminal Justice Bill [NIA 10/11-15] do now pass.

Private Members' Business

Energy: Consumer Advice

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

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to introduce a one-stop shop to provide free, independent and impartial advice to consumers and small businesses about their energy needs, to focus on saving consumers money and to encourage consumers to move away from fossil fuels and maximise energy efficiency.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta an rún seo a mholadh. I am hopeful that this will be one of the least contentious items that I will propose in the House, but I will wait and see how others react.

The soaring cost of energy, along with falling household incomes, presents great difficulties for many of our citizens, households and businesses. We have a complete over-reliance on fossil fuels for the creation of heat and electricity for our homes. In particular, the home heating oil industry is unregulated, and many people feel that there is an element of profiteering at some level in the supply chain. We have called on numerous occasions for that to be addressed. A Consumer Council report last week indicated that home heating oil prices had risen by around 60% over the past three years, so the issue of home heating oil is fairly pressing, with around 70% of homes being reliant on it. Of course, that figure is much higher in rural communities.

Aside from that, there are a considerable number of ways for consumers to save money on their overall energy costs. That can be done, but, even with saving that money, energy and electricity are still very expensive. Greater switching both between individual suppliers and between technologies needs to be facilitated. It needs to be made far easier for domestic and commercial consumers to compare the prices and services that alternative providers and alternative technologies offer, and switching should be made far easier.

We also need to make it far easier to facilitate the move to more sustainable and renewable forms of energy. There is a complete absence of information out there on the opportunities that exist in microgeneration and on the opportunities for farmers to make the best and most efficient use of their land to grow crops that can then be used to generate heat and power. That avenue has not really been explored to the extent that it should have been by the Departments that have responsibility for it. It needs to be done through a joined-up approach, where those setting energy policy work closely with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) to ensure that it is attractive for farmers to take such opportunities. Those crops can then be provided to local businesses or to local households so that homes can be heated. They can be put into district heating schemes to heat an entire housing development or into combined heat and power plants to generate electricity and heat for public buildings or private houses.

That is really where we are at the moment. If we look at the significant power outages of the past few weeks, we will see that one of the main reasons for them is our over-reliance on electricity that is generated in power stations and then transmitted around the place using overhead power lines. Those lines are very susceptible to having snow fall on them, and that damages the power lines themselves and the pylons. There really needs to be a greater in-depth study of how more electricity can be produced closer to consumers and households that do not live beside electricity generation stations. My view is that that could be more reliable for households and businesses and could reduce overall electricity and energy costs for all our citizens.

We discuss the issue as, once again, we face very high levels of fuel poverty, which are still stuck at a percentage in the mid-40s. There is an element of the cost of energy that people have to pay that is outside the control of the Assembly and the Executive, but there is much more that can be done.

One of the easiest ways to reduce household energy bills is to reduce the energy consumed by that household. The right way to do that is not by allowing prices to continue to rise so that people cannot afford to heat their home. The right and sensible way is to enable households to take proactive measures to improve the energy efficiency of their home so that they do not have to consume as much energy to provide adequate heating. One of the ways to do that is through a scheme such as the green

new deal, whereby finance was provided up front to households to allow them to get a wide range of retrofitted measures such as double glazing, wall and attic insulation and more efficient boilers. All those measures could be provided through one scheme that would be managed centrally so that people could phone in and see what is on offer.

Instead, at the moment, we have a boiler replacement scheme that has been fairly unsuccessful. It is quite hard for people who are fuel-poor or live in a poor household to avail themselves of that scheme. The numbers who have signed up for the scheme are fairly low, and, although there is considerable demand for it, only around 5% of those who make an enquiry can or do get it. The terms of the boiler replacement scheme need to be reviewed to ensure that it takes in those who are in greatest need. The fact that people have to pay £1,000 up front to avail themselves of the scheme is quite a disincentive for some people. The lack of some form of loan to get that £1,000, which could be paid back through reduced energy consumption, is part of the problem of the disjointed approach that we have to energy advice.

There is also a gap in the advice that is provided to our small businesses, many of which consume considerable amounts of energy. One of the first things that we will be told by energy companies, economists and others is that, if people switch to gas, they will save a considerable amount of money. The Consumer Council published a report that indicated that people could save £1,000 a year on household heating bills by moving from oil to gas, but that was a flawed report based on some poor figures. It was based on gas consumption across the whole of the North, even though some households used gas only to cook, and it included one-bedroom apartments, which is not typical of the situation faced in rural communities. The figure is actually much lower; it is around 25% to 35% according to the gas companies themselves. That is still a considerable saving, but it is difficult for a fuel-poor household to make that saving by moving from oil to gas and to come up with the £2,500 that it will cost. Much more needs to be done to see where people can get advice and what incentives there are to help fund those installation costs.

There is also a greater need for more technical services for households and small and medium enterprises that cover the type of heating system that they use, the type of boiler that they have installed in their house, the form of fuel that they use and whether it is in their best

interests to make the move away from fossil fuels and towards renewables. There is a need for such a service to be genuinely impartial. It cannot be taken forward by one of the energy companies or by someone who has a vested interest in promoting one form of energy or one supplier over another; it needs to be taken forward by government to ensure impartial credibility and a service that is in the best interests of the clients, not the energy or electricity companies.

1.45 pm

If this were done and done right, it would generate better results based on current levels of government expenditure. There are some advice services out there at the minute for energy efficiency schemes and renewables, but they are disjointed. It is not all done in one place. We need one simple freephone number, office or website through which people can avail themselves of this information. It should have all the information. At the minute, you have advice on NISEP schemes, the energy supplier obligation that is being brought in and the warm homes scheme. All of those have different phone numbers, and it is difficult for people to realise what is out there for them. That needs to be simplified.

I welcome the progress that has been made on energy advice to date. Considerable work has been done in this regard. In one evidence session, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment heard from energy officials in DETI that work is being done to establish a one-stop shop for energy advice. I welcome that progress, but I would like to ensure that it encompasses all the things that I have raised today. There are still significant gaps in the provision of advice, and it would be a sensible use of government funds to do this. It was one of the key aspects of my party's response to the consultation process that was undertaken by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment on the recent Energy Bill. I welcome the work that the Minister has done on that and look forward to hearing the comments of other Members on the matter.

Mr Newton: I suppose that one-stop shop energy advice is some sort of laudable objective, and it is sometimes difficult to argue against that kind of approach. However, the supporters of the motion have asked for the introduction of a one-stop shop to provide free, independent and impartial advice to consumers and, in particular, small businesses. That suggests that they do not believe that that advice is already being offered. There is a

history of one-stop shops in various fields. Indeed, Sinn Féin has a history of arguing for one-stop shops in other areas. Generally speaking, however, when that type of approach is used, the information provided, whether across the counter or on the internet, can be very general. There can be a lack of specialist and professional knowledge and detail with that kind of general approach. Indeed, there is generally no delivery with a one-stop approach; it is advice only. There can be a veneer that a one-stop shop will be the panacea that will address all the communication issues. Of course, cost-effectiveness and whether or not a one-stop shop would provide value for money also has to be taken into account.

In terms of what it would offer businesses, there is no doubt that SMEs may be the critical recipients of such advice. They require an energy infrastructure; that is vital to support the growth of SMEs. SMEs are the powerhouse of the Northern Ireland economy. Developing, delivering and sustaining that powerhouse really requires an infrastructure that offers them more than general advice. When those businesses have spoken on the matter, they have indicated that the areas that are of concern to them are around the introduction of a carbon floor price and that it is not passed on to consumers; ensuring that there are the same safeguards for microbusinesses as already exist for consumers in the domestic market; and abolishing rollover contracts and ensuring that microbusinesses are treated in the same way as domestic customers with regard to energy contracts. They have other issues, but they are not calling for a one-stop shop approach.

The other source of advice is the Carbon Trust, and I pay tribute to the Minister for the work that she has done in this area. Reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint is an objective of government, and the Minister has taken some steps forward in that respect. However, the Carbon Trust is also a player in the field, and its mission is to accelerate the move to a sustainable, low-carbon economy.

We will all be concerned about consumers and what we want for them. The proposer knows that the Consumer Council has addressed this issue as a priority in its strategy. It should be our concern to see that the Consumer Council offers all the direct and professional advice to the consumer that is possible and that it is in the consumer area, representing the voice of the consumer. Perhaps we are in danger of creating some confusion if we move from organisations that support businesses and organisations that support the professional area, as the Carbon Trust does, and address

the Consumer Council, maybe taking away from the work that the Consumer Council does.

It is a laudable objective. I will certainly need to see greater detail before I will be convinced that this is the way forward.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion and the opportunity that it has provided for debate on this important issue. We have a responsibility to help consumers and businesses reduce their energy costs, as we hear day and daily; maximise the energy efficiency of homes and business premises; and reduce the reliance on fossil fuels. I support the motion as way of encouraging the Minister and her Executive colleagues to bring forward their plans for the provision of independent and impartial advice.

It is clear that there is widespread support for the provision of independent and impartial advice to consumers and small businesses about their energy needs. There may, however, be some disagreement about how that provision should be funded and delivered. Indeed, we have heard some of that today already. Obligated companies involved in energy-saving schemes should, at the very least, be obliged to co-operate fully with the preparation and delivery of an independent and impartial advice service. If they are also to contribute to the funding of advice, that should be through allocations to a central pot for the use of the advice agency.

It is worth mentioning, however, the excellent work done by the Bryson Charitable Group through Bryson Energy to provide independent advice to consumers on energy efficiency and how to reduce their bills. In 2012, it handled over 34,000 telephone calls and referred 14,000 households to energy-saving grants.

We now have the opportunity to consider the best model to put in place rather than just tinker with the existing agencies. As such, there is a model in use on this island that the Executive should implement. The independent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the South provides advice and support to households and businesses on ways in which they can participate in making Ireland a more sustainable country while saving themselves moneys through its Be Green, Green Home, Green Business and Greening Communities programmes. The agency's independence is, of course, a key part in delivering that advice.

The SDLP argued for a fully independent environmental protection agency in the North

when the current agency was being established. Other parties obstructed the delivery of that. We argue for that independence again. That missed opportunity does not need to be missed again. An independent environmental protection agency could and should play an integral role in the delivery of impartial advice to consumers about their energy needs, focusing on reducing energy bills and encouraging consumers to move away from fossil fuels and maximise energy efficiency.

The SDLP has also long championed the green new deal as a key programme in improving our energy efficiency and boosting our economy. I am sure that people will argue that many of the measures from the green new deal are in place, but they are not. A key element that is absent from what DSD is delivering is door and window insulation. Other parties have obstructed the green new deal. A properly funded green new deal could help us build a sustainable economic recovery and help reduce energy costs and the consumption of fossil fuels. It remains the best way forward for the Assembly to address the real problems that our society faces. Given that, the SDLP supports the concept — I compliment Mr Flanagan for proposing it today — of a one-stop shop on energy advice as a good pointer and a good direction for a way forward.

Mrs Overend: This is a timely debate given the concern among many consumers, both individuals and businesses, about spiralling energy costs. We are all well aware in the House of the difficult economic conditions that consumers across Northern Ireland currently operate in. We need no further evidence than the latest labour force survey, which showed unemployment at its highest for 15 years and that the gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom in economic performance in a range of areas continues to grow.

The number of people surviving on unemployment-related benefits also remains stubbornly high, and it is, therefore, more important than ever for the Executive to show flexibility and put in place measures to ensure that sufficient information is provided to allow consumers to make informed choices about their utilisation of energy. Energy prices and energy efficiency are topics that are raised with me in my constituency of Mid Ulster on an ongoing basis, and I welcome the opportunity that the debate affords to keep it on the agenda as we seek solutions.

The main part of the motion is the introduction of what is termed a "one-stop shop" to provide free, independent and impartial advice to consumers about their energy needs. From looking at the recent consultation on the policy proposals for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's Energy Bill, I can say that it is clear that it is felt necessary to offer sufficient advice. That was clear because 90% of respondents highlighted its importance, including organisations such as the Consumer Council and Bryson. The government response to the consultation, published in February this year, is significant as it concluded that DETI and DSD will work together to provide impartial advice across the range of energy efficiency and fuel poverty schemes. It also said that exploration should begin on a one-stop shop for energy advice. Therefore, the policy content of this motion from Sinn Féin, whilst useful in highlighting the issue on the Floor of the Chamber, is nothing new.

The Minister, in her response, will no doubt deal with how that exploration is going as well the potential funding package that could be put together to allow the work to go forward. Action is needed, and, if the service is to be set up, it needs to be done as soon as practicably possible. It must be remembered that we are already well into the current Budget period, and slippages are apparent in far too many projects in a number of Departments. I would welcome an update from the Minister on the timescale for improvements in energy advice. Individual consumers and small businesses are struggling in the present, and advice and support could help change that in the short term.

The motion also specifically mentions that a one-stop shop of this nature should focus on saving consumers money, and I wholeheartedly agree with that. Only last week, there was a Consumer Council announcement that the cost of home heating oil in Northern Ireland had risen by 60% in the past three years. We are also aware that in the region of 42% of households in Northern Ireland are in fuel poverty, that consumers in Northern Ireland pay some of the highest petrol and diesel prices in Europe and that our 30% largest companies pay more for electricity than the rest of Europe. Whilst, of course, many of the underlying factors behind this are out of the control of the Executive, locally made decisions can help ease the burden on families and businesses across the country.

Moving away from expensive and finite fossil fuels is also an essential element of the motion. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's document entitled 'Energy — A

Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland' sets out that Northern Ireland will seek to achieve 40% of its electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2020. The 2011 to 2015 Programme for Government also commits the Northern Ireland Executive to encourage the achievement of 20% electricity consumption from renewable sources and 4% renewable heat by 2015. I call on the Minister to outline specifically how increased consumer knowledge and awareness through the advice and support of a one-stop shop will help in achieving those renewable energy targets.

In conclusion, I believe that a one-stop shop would bring benefits to how we provide advice on energy matters. At the moment, good work is being carried out through Invest NI, the Bryson Energy hotline, Housing Executive programmes and various DSD initiatives, but they operate in a silo mentality, and it creates confusion for the consumer. I look forward to the Minister's contribution.

2.00 pm

Mr Lunn: We will also support the motion. However, the one-stop shop may not need to be a new service but rather one bolted onto an agency that forms part of existing provision. We do not need another layer of advice, given the number of organisations already in this area. Every Member who has spoken so far has mentioned different organisations. There is quite a lot of advice out there.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

There is no reasonable doubt that we are overdependent on fossil fuels, whether to heat our homes or to provide electricity. The balance of oil fuel power in Northern Ireland is completely at variance from that which exists elsewhere in the UK. The motion, apart from its main demand for the Minister to introduce an independent and impartial advice service, encourages consumers to move away from fossil fuels. I heard Mr Flanagan's comment about profiteering in the oil industry. We debated this last year, and price differentials were identified, but I do not believe that I heard any firm evidence of profiteering. It is a fairly straightforward market.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. To clarify, when I spoke about profiteering, I was not generally talking about the distributors that we have here who are also facing soaring costs through the increasing price of fuel. I was talking about what happens before it reaches our shores or immediately

upon reaching our shores before it is cut down to smaller quantities. That is where the major problem lies.

Mr Lunn: Fair enough, but there are so many variables in that. It is all priced in dollars and all the rest of it.

From what I have heard so far, the proposed one-stop shop sounds like an extended Consumer Council coupled with input from other organisations, including those in the third sector. We encourage the proposers and the Minister to work through existing providers rather than starting something from scratch.

We need to be clear that UK-wide advice is not appropriate to Northern Ireland as we have always been quite different in this sector. The majority of households here still use oil to heat their homes. In Great Britain, this is below 5%, as the vast majority use gas. Advice on grants is also different and unique to Northern Ireland. The priority here is on identifying and targeting low-income households with measures funded through the Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme and the warm homes scheme and on much smaller incentives for heating conversions and insulation, such as boiler replacement or insulation cashbacks.

As the market in Northern Ireland is opened to new suppliers, the focus on supporting low-income, fuel-poor households has continued as an obviously high priority here. The amount of information available and the ease of access continues to improve through the internet, social media, and so on, but this may or may not be relevant to Northern Ireland-specific needs. Then, we have the sheer myriad information that needs to be negotiated. Therefore, there is a growing need — not a declining one — for more formal technical independent and impartial advice so that householders and businesses can make informed decisions independent of the product information that they receive from suppliers or installers.

We think that a service that offers two tiers of support — that is, a first line information and advice service complemented by a much more technical hand-holding service for those requiring additional support — is necessary. This is particularly so for those considering a major investment such as insulation or microgeneration technology. Of course, we did have the Northern Ireland advice centre, managed and operated by Bryson Energy, which Mr McGlone referred to. That was the EU regional agency for advising in the region of 40,000 to 60,000 households annually here. It

operated in partnership with the Energy Saving Trust and the Housing Executive for two decades, and in 2010-11 alone, it advised close to 40,000 households. I am told that this advice resulted in 41 million kilowatt hours of energy saved, a £3.6 million saving on domestic electricity bills and a reduction of close to 700,000 tons of CO₂.

We will support the motion as it stands. We hope that it will be a case of building on what is already there. In the current challenging economic climate, with rising fuel poverty and soaring energy costs, it is imperative that households can access and receive impartial local energy advice in an easily accessible way. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Members who tabled the motion for bringing the matter to the Floor. It is apt that we are speaking about energy issues today, given that we have just emerged from suffering some extreme weather conditions in various parts of our country. My constituency escaped the worst of the weather, but I am mindful that many have suffered great loss. Without doubt, the cold spell of weather, in a month when we should really be looking for warmer weather, causes further strain on households and small businesses striving to heat premises. For some of the most vulnerable in our society, particularly our elderly population, it is at present a struggle to cope with price increases and the need to keep healthy by staying warm.

That said, I thank, in the first instance, Minister Foster and Minister McCausland for their concerted efforts in bringing forward initiatives to assist businesses and householders. I certainly do not want to go into every initiative today, but it would be remiss of me not to mention some of the most successful. The warm homes scheme, for example, has seen thousands of homeowners and tenants obtain cavity wall insulation, central heating or gas implementation and loft insulation, among other energy-saving tips. The boiler replacement scheme has been and continues to be popular, giving people who have an old, inefficient boiler an opportunity to obtain money towards a new one. Both those initiatives are very practical, and many people in my constituency have availed themselves of them. However, we are mindful of the need to continue to push those schemes through the media and personal contacts, because many people still do not know that such assistance is available if they meet the qualifying criteria. I note that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, under guidance from the Department, has played a

role, along with Bryson Energy, in providing energy efficiency advice to householders in Northern Ireland. Again, that is a practical way to learn how to become more vigilant in your own home, conserve energy and ensure that energy bills are kept to a minimum.

Looking at the business side of things, I see again that the Minister has been particularly active in her efforts to aid small businesses in that regard, with Invest NI giving advice to businesses on how to achieve cost savings in the consumption of water, energy and raw materials. Invest NI is now able to provide tailored advice on trying to reduce such costs and interest-free energy efficiency loans for businesses, delivered by the Carbon Trust, which offers between £3,000 and £400,000 over four years to help Northern Ireland businesses to install energy-saving equipment. In addition, the House will be aware of the Minister's effort and drive, with the help of the Utility Regulator, in encouraging more energy providers to come into Northern Ireland so that there is more competitiveness and, therefore, cheaper prices for consumers. The Energy Wise campaign was hugely successful and aided businesses and householders through providing advice and signposting people to the relevant grants available and practical advice. Indeed, I encourage anyone to look at that website and take on board and implement some of the suggestions and ideas for saving money and energy.

With the worsening weather, the increasing cost of fossil fuels, high unemployment and lower incomes, there has never been a more difficult time for consumers and small businesses in coping with price increases. However, I commend the efforts that have been taken by this Government. This debate will evoke more ideas and suggestions for dealing with such. On the back of the debate, there may be some merit in the Minister looking for a way to gel all the initiatives and schemes together so that when a homeowner or business makes contact regarding energy costs, they will get sound advice about the best people or organisations to speak to. However, it is vital that it is not just another layer of bureaucracy or another helpline telephone number for people to ring. Certainly, we as a government do not need to waste further money on setting up another talking shop when that money could go towards tangible initiatives that will help the consumer. Ultimately, more work is needed on the notion of a one-stop shop, and I believe that today has provided a good opportunity to take a holistic view of the situation, with the next stage being further investigation by the Minister and her Department.

Mr Frew: I welcome the debate. Even though we have debated this subject so many times in the Chamber, it is a very important issue with which we as politicians and the community out there must grapple. We have only to look at our constituency offices to see the impact that fuel poverty has on our communities, households and families. We should talk about it and make a difference where we can.

Getting back to the motion, "one-stop shop" is a great phrase. If we could apply it to all things in life, everything would be rosy, fine and dandy. Problems would be solved so quickly. The phrase "one-stop shop" runs off the tongue very easily. However, we have to deal in reality, particularly when constituents come into my office asking me for assistance. We also have to deal with the reality of asking what percentage of constituents' pay goes on energy. That is the cold, hard reality.

The question must be posed: what can government do? What can the Executive do best to resolve the problem of fuel poverty? It will take millions upon millions of pounds to resolve it. It will take all the sectors and all the individuals and stakeholders in those sectors to push and pull together to help. Frankly, a one-stop shop will not be the be-all and end-all of the issue; it is much deeper and much more of a problem than that.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. He said that people come into his constituency office looking for support and advice. That is not good enough. Mr Newton said that there is no point in setting up a one-stop shop because the advice that would be given could be only general. Are you telling me that the advice that you can give in your constituency office is better than that that trained professional staff could give over a government-approved helpline?

Mr Speaker: The Member has another minute added to his time.

Mr Frew: Thank you very much.

I thank the Member for his contribution. The point is that we should be asking where people go to get reliable advice that they can trust and that you can see does not represent a body here or a body there. If we look at the groups from which we can get advice, we will see that there are the government groups, including the DSDs of this world, the Housing Executive and Advice NI. There is also Citizens Advice, the Northern Ireland Energy Agency, National Energy Action, Bryson House and Age Sector

Platform. All those groups and many more provide advice on this issue. I am not saying that it is bad advice; in fact, in most cases, it is all good advice. However, there is so much out there already that I do not know whether government should centre all the focus, and a lot of resources and time, on creating something that would only be a duplication. As a Government and an Executive, we should target things that get to the root of the problem. It is OK giving advice when things are hard and bad, but let us try to resolve the issues in the first place so that people do not have to come into our offices asking for advice.

What about incentivising renewable energy? What about delivering gas to the west so that people have a choice? What about a North/South interconnector to make sure that we have a grid that is fit for purpose and that will lead to cheaper electricity prices? That is what the businesses that come into my constituency office and those that I go to visit ask for. They tell me that they need cheaper energy prices because high energy prices hurt them the most. Government should set their face to target the root causes, help with choice and incentivise other options for people so that they have that choice.

One of the reasons why fuel poverty has hit us in Northern Ireland so hard is the reliance on oil. There is no doubt that the price of heating oil is a disproportionate driver of Northern Ireland's fuel poverty. I could be wrong, but I think that 70% of our households rely on oil. If they had a choice, it would go some way towards helping the situation.

2.15 pm

There are other practical things that we can do. I do not think that we should always ask the Executive for help with all the ills in society when they should be focusing on something else. Recently, constituents in the community that I represent got together, along with colleagues of the Member opposite on Ballymena Borough Council, to organise the Glenravel Oil Club, and I have had some input into that. They set up a community base and people can apply to join the group, which means that they can buy oil in bulk. It seems to be a very good and worthwhile idea, which leads to cheaper oil prices.

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

Mr Frew: The oil companies have a better opportunity to deliver once only, instead of

having to make three or four trips. Those are things that we can do in our community to assist those who are in fuel poverty.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. It is a very important issue right across Northern Ireland. We all recognise that the ever-increasing cost of energy has left Northern Ireland an extremely expensive place for householders to heat their homes. It has been said that 70% of householders are dependent on oil to heat their homes. As we have been told, there has been a 60% increase in the cost of that form of heating over the past three years, which is very concerning indeed.

Consumers are struggling to heat their homes and often have to rely on ordering smaller quantities of oil from suppliers. Tankers are delivering small quantities of 200 and 300 litres a time at excessive prices. Housing Executive tenants who have oil-fired heating systems cannot afford to buy oil at today's price of around £550 for 900 litres. Therefore, many are slipping into fuel poverty and spending well in excess of 10% of their income just to heat their homes. I believe that DSD, through the Housing Executive, could do more to convert oil heating systems to gas, particularly where the gas network is already in place. That is especially important in the greater Belfast area.

The uptake of gas generally is as low as 25% in some areas of the Province, and, in others, it is up to 50% within the current network. That is important, and it could be significant for many householders, because savings of up to 35% could be made compared with the cost of oil.

Energy efficiency is, of course, an ever-increasing priority for businesses in Northern Ireland. It has become the second-biggest overhead next to human resources. It is important that we support businesses to become as efficient as possible as they look at alternative sources of energy, with the introduction of energy-management strategies in their organisations. Support from Invest NI, with interest-free loans to buy energy-saving equipment, is essential.

There is evidence that getting energy advice in Northern Ireland can be confusing because a number of agencies are involved. Bryson Energy is heavily involved in giving advice in the greater Belfast area and plays a key role through the warm homes scheme. The Energy Saving Trust and the Consumer Council also have key roles to play in providing energy advice for householders and small businesses, along with Invest NI, which seeks to give advice

to large manufacturing and processing units in our Province.

Renewable energy also has a key role to play as an alternative source, and its uptake must be encouraged as we continue to progress and develop. Not only is a strong, sustainable energy sector vital to the economy, job creation and security of supply, but it is in the best interests of consumers. Supporting further growth in the sustainable energy sector will mean that Northern Ireland is less reliant on the importation of fossil fuels, and thus much less exposed to volatile international prices.

I believe that there is room for improvement, ensuring that householders have clarity when seeking energy advice. We need a simple, straightforward system in place with a strong customer focus. We can learn lessons from Scotland, which has introduced a one-stop shop on energy advice.

Much positive work has already been done through the Executive in tackling fuel poverty and improving energy efficiency for householders as well as businesses, through the work of the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, Arlene Foster, and the Social Development Minister, Nelson McCausland. The Executive are committed to the strategic energy framework. Its aim is for a more sustainable energy system with greater efficiency and greater use of renewable resources.

Mr Agnew: As we know well enough in this House, energy costs are a key issue for householders and businesses alike, and we have had a number of debates in the past on the issue of fuel poverty. I support the motion. There has been a lot of focus on the one-stop shop for advice, but the free, independent, impartial advice is a significant element of the proposal, especially when we look at the recent findings of Ofgem in respect of mis-selling by SSE. We need to ensure that consumers have an advice service that is independent and impartial and that they trust. It has been pointed out that there are a number of different advice-givers, but the information often comes from the same places. We need an organisation with that expertise, and I am not saying that there are not organisations out there with expertise, but we need one place for the different advice-givers to source their information and to ensure that accurate advice is being given to consumers.

I agree with Mr Newton and others who said that a one-stop shop is not, in itself, a panacea to our energy issues. We need a one-stop

shop combined with a one-track policy. Sometimes different signals come from government in Northern Ireland as to what road we should go down in terms of energy, and we have seen that with the tensions that exist between the policy to promote gas and the policy to drive forward with renewables and other sustainable forms of energy. On that point, in a previous debate, the Minister informed me that the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) included gas and sustainable energy. I have yet to find evidence of that, and I would be happy if the Minister could furnish me with information on where DECC defines that, but I have searched and there does not seem to be anything publicly available.

In Northern Ireland, as well as a twin-track approach on energy, we have a piecemeal approach on energy efficiency. We have the warm homes scheme, which is an excellent scheme, but we need to build on it and look at how we go beyond simply tackling energy efficiency in social housing, because a lot of our private housing is made up of families on low incomes as well. We have the NISEP scheme, but it is separate, and people do not know so much about it. I do not know whether it is so well known about among private householders, and now we have the boiler replacement scheme, which, as has been mentioned, has had mixed success.

Energy efficiency is key, and we had the opportunity in the green new deal to take a more strategic look. If we look at our housing infrastructure, it is just that — infrastructure — and rather than being seen as a private issue for householders, it is actually a government issue. In Northern Ireland, more people die from winter-related diseases per capita than in somewhere like Finland where they have much lower temperatures, but they have much better housing stock because they have seen the energy efficiency of homes as an infrastructure issue rather than a private issue.

Mr Frew mentioned that millions of pounds would need to be spent, and he is absolutely right, but do we see this as a key priority or not? Do we see fuel poverty and energy efficiency as a key priority for this Government? If we do, we need to spend those millions. We need a strategic government public spending programme to deliver on that key infrastructure project.

When we talk about infrastructure, we talk about roads, schools and hospitals — in a lot of cases, rightly so. However, we do not think of our housing stock as public infrastructure, and

that needs to change. We have an opportunity to change direction. We had the Prime Minister make a deferral, if not a decision, on the devolution of corporation tax. Clearly, behind the scenes, knowing that it would cost us at least £200 million a year to reduce corporation tax, maybe we need to think again about how to invest the money, which would be lost in tax receipts, in public infrastructure programmes such as the green new deal —

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

Mr Agnew: — and deliver something with tangible benefits that will tackle issues of fuel poverty, energy efficiency and sustainability.

Mr Speaker: As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. After Question Time, I have given leave for a Matter of the Day on the death of Baroness Thatcher. This debate will continue after that item has been concluded.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Minority Ethnic Development Fund

1. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the processing of applications for tiers 2 and 3 of the minority ethnic development fund. (AQO 3701/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We are pleased to say that, even in this time of austerity, the budget for the minority ethnic development fund for the next two years remains at £1.1 million per annum. The fund plays a significant role in supporting minority ethnic communities and in fostering integration. In line with the review of the fund, it is now more flexible and focused on the needs of groups applying and those from the ethnic minority communities.

Funding under tiers 2 and 3 is for two years. That extended funding has been welcomed by the sector. There were 49 applications under tier 2 for funding of up to £45,000 per annum and, under tier 3, for funding for up to £75,000 per annum. A selection panel comprising individuals drawn from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), the Community Relations Council, the PSNI, the Department for Social Development, the Equality Commission and Newry and Mourne District Council, with the knowledge of the sector and funding process, met on 26 March to consider those applications, as well as applications for funding under tier 1.

In line with our commitment made in the response to an Assembly question for written answer from Ms Anna Lo on 20 February, all applicants to tiers 2 and 3 were informed by 29 March of the outcome of the selection process. Letters of offer are being prepared. The quality of applications was very high. Unfortunately, not all applications could be funded. Tier 1 applications for funding for up to £15,000 are welcome up until December 2014. That will

allow groups to apply for funds in a more timely fashion for projects that will enhance race relations.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister give some indication about how the fund is being advertised? Does she feel that it is being advertised effectively enough? Are there any plans to ensure that there is greater coverage or a greater degree of advertising to encourage groups to come forward?

Ms J McCann: I am very conscious that a lot of consultation has gone on with various groups that are representative of the minority ethnic communities. I know that you chair the all-party group on ethnic minorities. There have been advertisements in the local papers, so I think that it is out there. A lot of people know about it already, will avail themselves of it and have put in applications.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Will there be a provision for crisis funding in the minority ethnic development fund?

Ms J McCann: I thank the Member for her question. The Member will know that, sometimes, there is very great need for crisis funding for people in the minority ethnic communities. In line with the recommendations from an evaluation of the fund that is ongoing, we have agreed, in principle, that there should be a crisis fund element to it. That will be in addition to the £1.1 million budget for 2013-14. The size of the crisis fund element, which could, potentially, be up to £200,000 per annum, is to be decided, and the spend will depend on the scale of the calls and the need for it.

A crisis fund element will give the minority ethnic development fund a greater degree of flexibility and allow it to deal with emergency situations, through small one-off payments, for example. Those moneys are a vital and welcome tool in helping those who are at their lowest ebb. We will continue to encourage Executive colleagues to act with greater cohesion and awareness of the difficult position that some migrant workers, for instance, find themselves in. That will include processing eligible claims for benefits in a timely manner, recognising the eligibility of foreign nationals for services and ensuring that the Department for Employment and Learning's migrant workers strategy, as agreed by the Executive, is implemented. The crisis fund will also allow statutory authorities to work with their colleagues in the voluntary and community sectors to intervene in a co-ordinated way,

within a time line, that will help those who are most vulnerable at a very critical moment of their lives.

Ms Lo: In the past year and a half, the administration of the fund has been disgraceful. Each time, the funding is applied for and granted on a six-monthly basis. Today is 8 April 2013. The funding for those organisations ended on 31 March 2013. They still do not know how much money they will get.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to her question.

Ms Lo: Given that the funding should have started on 1 April, when will organisations that have been granted funding know how much they will get and when they will get the money?

Ms J McCann: All that I can say to the Member is that we have discussed the matter. We have received strong representations, like that which she has just made. We will endeavour to deal with the matter as soon as possible.

Mr Eastwood: Further to Ms Lo's question: NICEM told us in Committee that groups have had to close due to delays in processing that funding. Can the junior Minister assure the House that that will no longer happen and that this is a new system, which will be more effective and will ensure that groups can stay on their feet and keep doing their good work?

Ms J McCann: I say to the Member what I said to Ms Lo; we will be taking this forward with urgency, and because those groups do essential work, we will certainly seek to ensure that they do not have to close. Sometimes, there is particular need for crisis funding when people are in greatest need. We will take that on board.

FM/DFM: Americas Visit

2. **Mr McDevitt** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an outline of their schedule and the costs of their recent official visits to the Americas. (AQO 3702/11-15)

11. **Ms McCorley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their recent visit to Brazil and the USA. (AQO 3711/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 11 together.

As part of our work to build relationships with the world's leading economies, the First Minister and I made our first official visit to Brazil last month. We then travelled on Executive business to Los Angeles and, finally, to Washington DC. Recently, Brazil became the world's sixth largest economy. While we were in Brazil, we undertook more than 12 separate meetings in three cities. We met the Brazilian Foreign Minister and deputy Trade Minister in Brasília. In São Paulo, we had a meeting with the owners of Marfrig, a company that employs more than 5,500 people at its plants at Moy Park and O'Kane Poultry. We used that meeting to underscore the importance of that investment and to encourage the company to expand its operation here. Through its operations here, Marfrig is the single largest employer in the North.

We also met and briefed the vice president and board of Federação das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo (FIESP), the Brazilian industrial employers' body, to promote investment and trade opportunities. In Rio de Janeiro, our visit included meetings with the governor of the state and the city's mayor. We also visited a five-million-square-metre redevelopment project that has the potential to offer business opportunities for local companies. Along with the archbishop of Rio de Janeiro, I took part in a Tourism Ireland initiative at the statue of Christ the Redeemer, which was turned green to celebrate St Patrick's Day. That iconic event was part of a global Tourism Ireland initiative to attract more tourism to Ireland. The First Minister travelled to Los Angeles for a number of engagements.

Our visit to the USA had two key objectives. First, we were invited to the White House by President Obama to meet him to discuss progress here. Secondly, we accepted an invitation from Michael Lombardo, president of HBO programming, to meet him in Los Angeles at the premiere of the third series of 'Game of Thrones'. With regard to the HBO invitation, we wanted to take time to talk one to one with Michael Lombardo to help to persuade HBO to film the fourth series of 'Game of Thrones' here. The HBO relationship is vital to the local creative industry sector. The past three series of 'Game of Thrones' have brought an estimated £65 million into the local economy. When it is in full employment, some 800 people are working on the set. We are delighted that our invitation has paid dividends. Just last week, HBO announced that series 4 will be filmed here. Therefore, the time that we spent with Michael Lombardo and his senior team was worth it. We will continue to do all that we can to promote the creative industry sector.

Finally, we travelled to Washington DC, where we met President Obama in the White House. We brought him up to date on developments here. We spoke about the G8 summit. We explored opportunities to have the president do something specifically for us to promote the local economy. We also attended the Speaker of the House of Representatives' Friends of Ireland lunch with the president, the Taoiseach and leading congressional figures. Our last engagement was the Executive Bureau's annual St Patrick's Day breakfast, where we promoted the G8, the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture and the World Police and Fire Games. That event attracted an audience of 250 senior influencers from industry, politics and the Obama Administration.

Throughout our visit to Brazil and the USA, the Executive information service issued a series of press releases and photographs. Those releases demonstrated very clearly the range of meetings and events that we attended.

Final costs for the entire visit are being collated and will be published in due course.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Conall McDevitt for a supplementary question, I remind the deputy First Minister of the time limit. I can understand, given the nature of some questions, that there are occasions when Ministers need more time.

Mr McDevitt: Thank you, Mr Speaker. In the deputy First Minister's defence, I did ask him.

I acknowledge the efforts that the First Minister and deputy First Minister and, indeed, all Executive Ministers make on our behalf to try to promote this region abroad. Given that Deputy Gerry Adams said in the Dáil only last month that confidence in Government is built on the transparency and accountability of that Government, and given that that is a commitment of the First Minister in the DUP manifesto, will the deputy First Minister, if he is not in a position as yet to provide me with the costs for the United States trip, provide me with the costs for the trip to China last year?

Mr M McGuinness: The reality is that it was decided that announcements about the cost of visits will be made on the website twice yearly, so that is where you will find, within a very short period in the not-too-distant future, the full costs of the trip to China and India last year and the costs of the trip to Brazil and the United States.

I think that it would have been much more productive if Members of the SDLP who

commented on this had prefaced their remarks with the remarks that you made initially in praising my efforts and those of the First Minister in attracting foreign direct investment to the North. In spite of what 'The Irish News' says, prior to us successfully attracting the New York Stock Exchange, Chicago Mercantile and, indeed, many other businesses to the North, quite clearly, we have, against all the predictions and a world economic recession, been hugely successful in building personal relationships not just in the United States but now in Brazil.

It is very important to make a comment about some of the ridiculous headlines in the paper about the costs of the rooms that we stayed in. Those headlines bore no relationship whatsoever to the costs paid through discounted government rates for those rooms. We stayed in those hotels, of course, on the advice of Irish Government and British Government diplomatic services who ensured our security while we were there. Quite simply, the First Minister and I would not know the safest hotel to stay in while in São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro, so we depend on advice from diplomatic services, and that advice and assistance was given to us. Some of the reporting was absolutely scandalous. There was a focus almost on what you ate for breakfast as opposed to the huge amount of work being done to try to attract foreign direct investment, much of which has been absolutely and totally successful thus far.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Will the Minister outline the particular benefits of the successful meeting with HBO in regard to 'Game of Thrones'?

Mr M McGuinness: 'The Irish News', through one of its business correspondents, remarked that a lot of these things would have happened anyway and that it was absolutely not down to the efforts of the First Minister and deputy First Minister or the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment that these businesses came to the North of Ireland.

The reality is that we built up important relationships with senior executives at HBO. In fact, our first meeting with them was way back in March 2009, which, as many people here will remember, was a difficult time in the politics of this place. Of course, the relationship with HBO convinced it that it should come to the Paint Hall in Belfast and begin filming 'Game of Thrones', which has turned out to be a worldwide hit. Three series have been filmed on location in the North of Ireland, and a

commitment has now been given to film a fourth series here. That would not have happened without the relationship-building efforts that we made to get to know senior executives and to outline what we had on offer.

The same goes for the New York Stock Exchange and the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. Those politicians in the House who lined up alongside some of the media on the outside by making cheap shots and by trying to undermine the efforts to attract foreign direct investment should be ashamed of themselves.

2.45 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answers to date and for his vigorous defence. I am sure that he would agree that the majority of Members, perhaps even the entire House, would acknowledge the importance of political leaders leading trade delegations. I just wonder why you allowed the media to create the conditions in which they brought this unwanted and negative focus on you for alleged secrecy about some details of your trips.

Mr M McGuinness: It is interesting that McDevitt and Mr Nesbitt prefaced their remarks by saying that they support our efforts. It would have been great if that had been said when people spoke to the media. *[Interruption.]* It was not said when people spoke to the media. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr M McGuinness: People tried to score cheap political points at the expense of what were very strenuous efforts in Brazil and the United States of America to attract further foreign direct investment.

In all the visits that we have participated in — for example, those to India and China — we have been accompanied by senior representatives of very important companies in the North. They have built up relationships with those countries and have seen their manufacturing exports to those countries increase. All the representatives of those companies who have spoken have said that having the First Minister and the deputy First Minister with them was a huge boost to their efforts to attract further business.

That is the work that we are engaged in, and I am not going to take any nonsense from anybody who is trying to score cheap political points and to undermine the work that is continuing to attract foreign direct investment

and to provide jobs and further manufacturing opportunities for our companies.

Mr Weir: Will the deputy First Minister expand on the discussions that he and the First Minister had with President Obama on the forthcoming G8 conference?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, it is absolutely incredible that a small place such as this has an opportunity that is the envy of many western governments. Given President Obama's full attention to what has been happening on the island of Ireland and specifically with the peace process in the North, every year we get to spend almost a full day with him in the White House.

This is the fifth occasion that the First Minister and I have been in the White House with President Obama. His interest has not flagged. He is hugely interested in what has been happening here recently and in assisting us as we continue to move forward. That is absolutely consistent with previous Administrations.

Of course, as the G8 is in Fermanagh, and as the President is involved in that trip and that very important meeting, we explored the possibility that, outside that engagement, something could be done to assist our efforts to attract foreign direct investment. Our Administration and the US Administration are exploring that.

These are hugely important relationships, and they are far too important for people to take the opportunity to undermine the work that we have been involved in by trying to score cheap political points. We need to build on those relationships, whether they are with India, China, Brazil or the United States of America. The evidence has clearly shown that building such relationships bears fruit and allows us to capitalise on the opportunities that are out there for our businesses as they struggle against the backdrop of a very difficult world recession.

So, I am very hopeful that, during President Obama's visit to Fermanagh, we will see him involve himself in a further initiative outside that arrangement to assist our drive for further foreign direct investment.

Delivering Social Change: Literacy and Numeracy

3. **Mr Kinahan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their work with the Department of Education on the

signature programme to improve literacy and numeracy levels under the Delivering Social Change framework. (AQO 3703/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer this question.

Ms J McCann: You will be aware that, on 10 October last year, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced six significant signature programmes to the value of £26 million under the Delivering Social Change framework. This initial phase of programmes is designed to tackle multigenerational poverty and improve children's health and well-being and their educational and lifetime opportunities. Work on the implementation of all programmes is ongoing, and discussions between officials and lead Departments continue in order to ensure effective delivery at the earliest opportunity.

The Department of Education is taking forward the implementation of the Delivering Social Change literacy and numeracy signature programme, which will support improvements in literacy and numeracy attainment in our schools. Some 230 recently graduated teachers will be appointed to ensure additional support for children: 80 teachers in primary schools will assist in achieving the expected levels in reading and maths at Key Stage 2, and the programme will provide tuition by 150 teachers to pupils in post-primary schools not predicted to get at least a grade C in GCSE English and maths.

The Western Education and Library Board, which has been appointed as the lead board to help to deliver the programme, set up a strategic oversight group that has undertaken considerable work to develop the final scheme and ensure that it is practical and compatible with legal requirements.

The criteria for the identification of eligible teachers have been developed taking into account advice received from the Equality Commission. That advice is under discussion, with the aim to commence recruitment this month. The programme is on target to ensure that the additional teachers will be appointed prior to the beginning of the 2013-14 academic year.

Mr Kinahan: I very much welcome this initiative, but I feel that progress is very slow given that we are now six months into it. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we target

not just pupils but families and communities so that we get to everyone who needs this help?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that a further five signature programmes are being undertaken at the same time: direct family support; support for parents; pathways to employment for young people; accelerating social enterprise; and early intervention for vulnerable children, which involves putting nurture units into schools. So there is a package, but I totally agree that we have to look at this in the round when it comes to helping families, particularly those who are struggling to help to support children through their school years. We look at this as a holistic package, all of which should be taken forward at the same time.

Mr Rogers: Do all Departments involved in Delivering Social Change have their modules in place? At what stage will the modules be in operation and then assessed?

Ms J McCann: The early work of the Delivering Social Change programme board and ministerial subcommittees has focused, as I said earlier, on the identification of the needs of children and families to ensure that the most urgent priorities affecting them are addressed first. In line with that, we have already agreed the 'Children and Young Persons Early Action Document', which identifies the key priorities.

As well as the development of early actions, the Executive decided that it was critical that all Departments came together to deliver the programmes, and even more immediate actions to address the priorities that we have already identified. So this is not just about the six signature projects being taken forward; it is about getting Departments to work together and to see that they must work in a collaborative and holistic way. We cannot single out each programme; we must, as I said to another Member, deliver a package of programmes to help those children, young people and, particularly, families.

Corporation Tax

4. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on their discussions with the British Government on devolving corporation tax powers. (AQO 3704/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: We met the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, on 26 March to discuss the devolution of corporation tax powers to the Executive. He said that he would

take no decision until after the Scottish referendum in September 2014. Obviously, given that it was his Government that ran at this issue through Owen Paterson, we find that delay disappointing.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer and share his frustration and anger at the British Government's response. Does the Minister agree that the decision taken by David Cameron bears no relationship to the nature of the problems in the local economy that the Executive are attempting to address and that are, in fact, dictated by Westminster's selfish concerns?

Mr M McGuinness: All of us have been very focused over the course of recent years — not just ourselves, but the business community as well — on the prospect of successfully negotiating the devolution of corporation tax powers to our Administration. We have to deal with the political realities that we face. We had a Secretary of State, Owen Paterson, who majored on the issue for quite some time and built up the hopes, not just of the business community, but of those in the political institutions. We have now seen that there will be no decision until after the Scottish referendum.

Of course, in the immediate aftermath of the appointment of Teresa Villiers as Secretary of State, in a meeting that the First Minister and I had with her and members of the Treasury in London, the first signals were clearly given that constitutional issues were going to impact on this decision, particularly in relation to the Scottish referendum. The situation is now quite clear: there will not be a decision. It was made clear to us during the course of the meeting that the Prime Minister wishes to put a package of measures together to assist. Our officials and his will meet over the next couple of weeks, and we await the outcome of those deliberations to see whether they will make any significant contribution towards helping us to challenge the very difficult state of our economy at the moment.

As to the issue of a decision in the aftermath of the Scottish referendum; we just have to wait and see. There has been a lot of commentary in the media, and some of us have commented also, that the decision to put legislation before Westminster would be taken in the aftermath of the referendum. We will continue to argue for that, and our hope has to be that that will come to pass, but I think many people are sceptical as to whether such legislation would pass

before the British House of Commons prior to the next Westminster election.

Mr Campbell: The deputy First Minister has indicated that the delay is as we all know it to be. Has he, along with the First Minister, given any thought to pressure that can be applied, between now and the summer, to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet to try to ensure that this issue becomes a top-of-agenda item?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes. The First Minister and I have had many important discussions, and we are totally at one in trying to achieve the devolution of corporation tax powers to our Administration. That would be absolutely vital for us. It is not a panacea for all our problems, but we believe, in foreign direct investment, that we could attract tens of thousands of new jobs. We will continue to work and apply pressure to the British Government to recognise that they need to stand by the commitments that they made.

In the course of the Downing Street meeting, I reminded David Cameron that we were effectively being hit with a triple whammy in relation to the failure of his Administration to stand by the commitment of the previous Government on a peace dividend, effectively cutting our capital budget by 40%; the delay in the devolution of corporation tax powers that means we do not have immediate assistance in getting that up and running, and we have to wait for the outcome of a Scottish referendum; and the whole issue of the welfare cuts that are under discussion both in London and here, which mean that we have a very difficult economic environment in the time ahead, with very large sums of money effectively being sucked out of our economy. We will continue to work and pressurise for a better deal from an Administration that, thus far, has not shown itself to be up for that.

3.00 pm

Justice

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

G8 Summit: Policing

1. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on discussions he has had with the PSNI in regard to the policing arrangements for the forthcoming G8 summit. (AQO 3715/11-15)

2. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the discussions he has had with the PSNI with regard to facilitating effective policing of the G8 summit. (AQO 3716/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With permission, I will answer questions 1 and 2 together.

My officials and I are having regular discussions with the police regarding the planning for the G8 summit. Policing of the summit is an operational matter, but I know that planning is well advanced. There can be no doubt that this is a major task and that police are seized of its importance.

Planning for the G8, of course, is not just about policing. There is clearly an Executive interest in this being an occasion that showcases Fermanagh and, indeed, Northern Ireland as a whole. An Executive subgroup has, therefore, been meeting regularly to bring together the many strands that will make the G8 summit a success and maximise the opportunities it presents for Northern Ireland.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm whether representations were made to his Department last December by the Office of the Police Ombudsman about the lack of accountability for English police officers who may come here to assist our own officers with policing arrangements for the G8, and will he explain how that accountability vacuum will be resolved before the G8 takes place?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Flanagan for that question. I cannot confirm the date on which the issues might have been raised, but the issue of oversight arrangements for police officers moving between Northern Ireland and Great Britain appeared before the G8 issue came under discussion and included, for example, questions around policing the Olympics. However, the Police Ombudsman, the PSNI, the Home Office and my Department are having ongoing discussions on exactly how to ensure the proper compliance with the oversight arrangements that we have under section 60 of the Police Act. Officials are working to ensure that that can be done. There is a slight complication in that, although Scotland has simplified matters, now having a single police force, and agreement in principle has been reached with the Scottish authorities, each of the 43 police and crime commissioners in England and Wales has to be consulted.

However, I have no doubt that the matters will be in hand before the G8 summit takes place.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for his response so far. Given the experience of previous years, does he believe that there is sufficient police cell capacity in Fermanagh to cope with the inevitable criminal activity from protesters who will travel to the G8 summit?

Mr Ford: Although I thank Mr Hussey for that question, I am not sure that I could agree that "inevitable" is the appropriate word to apply. Preparations based on predictability include arrangements to deal with issues such as cell accommodation and court service — I suspect not necessarily in County Fermanagh alone but in Northern Ireland as a whole — to ensure that, if there is any difficulty and crime is committed, the people arrested will be dealt with expeditiously.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. We all agree with him and hope that this will be an excellent opportunity to showcase the best of Northern Ireland. In addition to the policing plans, may we assume that the justice system as a whole will be prepared for any eventuality that may occur and that policing alone will not be at the forefront?

Mr Ford: Yes, I assure Mr McCarthy that it is not simply a matter of policing. Work is going ahead in the Prison Service and in the Courts and Tribunal Service and with the Youth Justice Agency to plan to deal with anything that may occur as a result of the G8. We will then have the opportunity to show that, if needed, our justice system works well alongside what I hope will be a positive opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: Welcome as the G8 is to Northern Ireland, will the Minister update the House on whether the target is still to second 3,000 officers from GB and how that is progressing? Also, what will be the likely ultimate outcome for the Northern Ireland Budget of hosting the G8?

Mr Ford: I notice that Mr Allister carefully gets in two questions. I cannot give him the exact number of police officers who have been sought under mutual aid, but it is in the region of 3,000. I understand that a number of police services in GB have found that more people than required are willing to come to police the G8. So, there has been an element of local competition, which I think is a sign of positive arrangements.

The overall cost is currently under discussion, as is so much related to G8 planning.

However, there are arrangements for the Home Office to pay a significant proportion of mutual aid costs. In some cases, police expenditure is being expedited to deal with G8 requirements and, in other cases, to meet individual special requirements. Those details have still to be worked out, but work is ongoing to ensure that it is not a charge to the Northern Ireland Budget when it should be a charge to the UK Budget.

Mr A Maginness: I note with interest what the Minister said about costs. Can he quantify the potential cost of security and give an outline of who will bear the cost? What proportion will be borne by the Home Office and what proportion may be borne by Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I congratulate Mr Maginness on an extremely good question. The answer is that it is not possible to give the detail that he requests. I know that very significant sums of money were expended when the G8 was last in the UK, at Gleneagles, and the current estimate is that it will cost somewhat less than that to stage the G8 in County Fermanagh. Clearly, there is work to be done between my Department, the police and the NIO to review the overall resource requirements. There is an issue about the overall cost, which falls to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office because it is an international event at that stage, and the costs of mutual aid, which fall in part to the Home Office as part of the process. So, although I am happy to provide figures when we have them, at this stage, I fear, it would be erroneous to suggest that I can give too much detail.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been answered. As I indicated, question 3 has been withdrawn.

Limavady Courthouse

4. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the future of Limavady courthouse. (AQO 3718/11-15)

Mr Ford: Limavady courthouse is not scheduled to close until after the reform of court boundaries and the creation of a single jurisdiction for County Court and Magistrates' Court business. The reform of court boundaries is planned within the forthcoming faster, fairer justice Bill, which will be introduced in the Assembly later this year.

Mr G Robinson: Can the Minister give an estimated cost of maintaining the building after closure, taking into consideration that it would

be a viable asset if there was a security alert at the Londonderry courthouse?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that I cannot give the current estimate of what it will cost to maintain the building after closure. It will certainly be significantly less than the running costs of the building, and it will mitigate what would have been a very significant requirement for capital investment under the Disability Discrimination Act.

Mr Swann: Will the Minister outline why the 2009 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report on the strategic outline case for an estate management strategy for the then Northern Ireland Court Service was not made public at the time and what consideration, if any, the Minister gave to that report before he made the decision on Limavady?

Mr Ford: In answer to what happened in a report from 2009, a year before the devolution of justice powers, I refer the Member to the Ministers who were responsible for that report. What is now being looked at is an overarching Department of Justice estate strategy to ensure that the estate is fit for purpose and meets the needs of users, with decent accommodation meeting the needs of all of the services that are provided by the DOJ. It is my commitment to ensure that now, under devolution, we do what is right.

PSNI: Recruitment Agencies

5. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Justice whether the director of human resources for the PSNI sitting on the internal audit committee of the PSNI conflicts with his role in negotiating and approving contracts to recruitment agencies that have rehired retired police officers for the PSNI. (AQO 3719/11-15)

Mr Ford: The director of human resources for the PSNI is not a member of the PSNI's audit and risk committee. Although he has a standing invitation to attend the committee in his capacity as an executive officer in the PSNI, he is currently not a member of that committee. Therefore, I do not consider there to be a conflict of interest. In the past, the director was a member of the PSNI's audit and risk committee, from its inaugural meeting in March 2004 until October 2012. What changed was that, in July 2012, the committee undertook a self-effectiveness review. In line with best practice guidance, the committee decided that its membership should consist only of non-executive members. As a result, the director of

human resources' membership of the committee ceased on 26 October last year.

Mr McCartney: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that, during the period when the director was in both organisations, it was a conflict of interest? It should have been spotted at the time and corrected. It is a perfect example of the situation that we are trying to avoid, where someone is a gamekeeper during the day and a poacher by night.

Mr Ford: I am not sure that I agree with Mr McCartney's supplementary question about poachers and gamekeepers in that respect. It is not for me to judge whether there is a conflict of interest. It is for the board of the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) and its members to consider whether there is a conflict of interest that would affect the performance of duties. There has been no suggestion of improper conduct or relationships between anyone on the board and the police and any of the private sector companies that provide services to the PSNI.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister share my concern that there appears to be a consistent concern around the potential for conflicts of interest among a very small number of senior civilian staff in the Northern Ireland Police Service? Does he believe that the Police Service, as a whole, needs to be very attentive to the potential impact that such potential or perceived conflicts of interest can have on police confidence?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr McDevitt about the need for there not to be perceived conflicts of interest. That is why I believe that the action that was taken last year by the audit and risk committee under its own self-effectiveness review dealt with that issue. Clearly, however, these are issues that, when it comes to potential perceptions, can occur in different parts of the public sector at different times. What is important is that there is no reason why there should any concern about the behaviour of senior officers and that that should be as transparent as possible.

Mr Beggs: Former police officers will have gained particularly relevant experience when serving that can be advantageous to the PSNI and the public in bringing criminals to account. Is the Minister surprised that some elected representatives seem to be determined to try to restrict opportunities for those who have previous relevant experience yet, at the same time, want to open up opportunities for those who have been convicted of criminal offences?

Mr Speaker: Order. We are going well outside the question that is on the Order Paper. I will allow the Minister to answer if he wants to, but I am concerned that, generally, we are going outside the question.

Mr Ford: I will simply say that it is not for me to comment on whether I am surprised by much of what is said by Members of the House from different sides at different times. It is absolutely the case, however, that we must ensure that when employment law is applied it is upheld by all public agencies.

Mr Clarke: Following on from the previous question, which was about retired and rehired police officers, does the Minister accept, given that many of the parties, except my party, voted for the Good Friday Agreement and the Patten reforms, that the Patten reforms allowed for the rehiring of retired police officers?

Mr Ford: It is not so much a matter of the Patten reforms as highlighted by Mr Clarke but the simple issue that employment law allows people to be hired by private sector organisations.

Mr Speaker: Members know very well that their supplementary question must relate to the question that is on the Order Paper. There have been occasions when that has not been the case.

Newtownards Courthouse

6. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice what plans are in place to make Newtownards courthouse fit for purpose following the planned closure of Bangor courthouse. (AQO 3720/11-15)

Mr Ford: Newtownards courthouse is currently fit for purpose and able to facilitate the transfer of court business from Bangor. An additional consultation room is being made available.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer, although I do not agree with it totally. I am very aware of the concerns, especially in the legal profession, about the existing lack of facilities at Newtownards courthouse. Therefore, does the Minister have any plans to invest capital expenditure at Newtownards to provide adequate facilities given the overload from Bangor?

Mr Ford: If Mr Dunne has particular points that he wishes to raise, I will happily listen to them. My understanding from the staff of the Courts

and Tribunals Service is that Newtownards courthouse is fit for purpose, but, of course, as part of the wider DOJ estates strategy, which I referred to earlier, we will examine all our buildings.

Mr Agnew: I will be more specific. Concerns have been raised with me about disability access to Newtownards courthouse and spaces for privacy between solicitors and their clients. Will the Minister look at those issues?

Mr Ford: I take Mr Agnew's point about disability access. I do not have a specific answer, but I will look into that issue. I thought that I had addressed the issue of private consultations when I told Mr Dunne that we had provided an additional consultation room, although it is my understanding that it is relatively little used.

3.15 pm

Mr Kinahan: What resources is the Minister putting towards improving courthouses in the areas surrounding some of those being closed this year and next year to ensure a sufficient court service in those areas?

Mr Ford: The proposals for the closure of the four small hearing centres were all put through on the basis that adjacent courthouses had appropriate times and space available to accommodate the sittings that previously happened in the smaller centres. However, as I have said, there is the ongoing issue of the review of the DOJ estate, and all these issues will be taken into consideration.

Community Safety College

7. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the Desertcreat training college capital project. (AQO 3721/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Community Safety College is important to both the DOJ and DHSSPS in that it will provide an efficient and fit-for-purpose training centre for the Police Service, the Prison Service and the Fire and Rescue Service.

The business case for the project estimated the capital costs at £139m, of which construction costs were forecast at £103m. That estimate was revised upwards by £30m in December 2012 following feedback from the bidders during the tender process. The project board has been seeking measures that will reduce costs without affecting the operational

functionality of the college to ensure that the project remains affordable and provides value for money. A cost reduction of £14.5m has already been identified by the project team, and work is continuing.

DOJ and DHSSPS officials are working to expedite the development of a business case addendum. It will be submitted to the two Departments for support prior to submission to DFP for approval. The approach of carrying out a cost reduction exercise and revising the business case maintains the integrity of the procurement process, which was handled by the health estate's centre of procurement expertise.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. Obviously, Members are concerned that the figures had to be revised, with a £30 million deficit having been found. Is the Minister confident that the project board has the capabilities to manage this project properly in light of the £30 million shortfall that has been identified? Secondly, is he confident that the process that the board has outlined to deal with the matter by trying to reduce the costs will not compromise the tendering process and then be subject to a judicial review, which could protract the project for a very long period?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Givan for those supplementaries. I believe that the programme board has performed well and is not responsible for the cost overrun. The design team has admitted that mistakes were made on the part of cost consultants. The design team's lead has resigned and been replaced by a senior executive with significant global experience. The cost consultants have been replaced, and other changes to the senior management of the design team have been made. I believe that we have shown that work is being done to deal with those issues. However, it is clear that some additional funding is likely to be required.

On the wider point about how the issue is being managed, the cost reduction exercise is based on the premise of using rates that have already been set for parts of the work to reduce the cost where necessary. It is not a renegotiation; it is a matter of seeing whether elements can be taken out of the contract without affecting the viability of the college. That work is now under way, with a significant effort already achieved.

Mr Elliott: Given the £30 million overspend projection, is the Minister still confident that the project commands the support of the entire Executive?

Mr Ford: I can tell Mr Elliott that the entire Executive have not had the opportunity to look either at the current state of play or the situation that will be arrived at when the cost reduction exercise has been gone through. Clearly, at that stage, there may be issues that need to be referred to DFP. If they need to be referred to DFP, they will be referred to DFP, but, as far as I am concerned, it is a key commitment of the Department of Justice and part of the Programme for Government that the Desertcreat college should go ahead.

Prisons: Job Opportunities

8. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Justice, given the number of positions in the Northern Ireland Prison Service which have been offered to and accepted by people previously employed in HM Prison Service in England, what discussions have taken place with his counterparts there to ensure that people from the Northern Ireland Prison Service have the same opportunities afforded to them by prisons in England. (AQO 3722/11-15)

Mr Ford: All appointments to the Northern Ireland Prison Service on either a temporary or permanent basis are made in accordance with the 'Northern Ireland Civil Service: Recruitment Policy and Procedures Manual'. The former members of the National Offender Management Service employed by NIPS were recruited following public advertisement. I am not aware of any restriction preventing NIPS employees applying for positions advertised in Great Britain, and no discussions have taken place with ministerial counterparts.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. Is there any evidence, anecdotal or otherwise, to suggest that the short-term contracts being offered for positions here are a disincentive to local applicants and suit those who may have taken early retirement from similar positions on the mainland? Does the Minister have any plans to look at any CPD or secondment options that might upskill our serving Northern Ireland prison officers?

Mr Ford: Miss McIlveen certainly raises an interesting question about the effect of the limited number of short-term secondment contracts. It may be that those are more attractive to people at a particular stage of employment than they are to others. However, certainly, all such posts are open completely, as are posts in Great Britain for people who wish to move from Northern Ireland. So, I think that the evidence, if there is any, is fairly unclear and that we are talking about a very small

number of people. As I understand it, one employee of the Northern Ireland Prison Service is a former employee of the National Offender Management Service in England and Wales, and three members of staff will shortly be seconded from NOMS, two of whom will be on a short-term contract and the other on a permanent contract.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he ensure that all the posts are based on the principles enshrined in equality legislation?

Mr Ford: That is certainly the case, and I assure Mr Boylan of that. All posts are filled by open advertisement in full compliance with all employment legislation, including equality legislation.

Criminal Justice: Inspire Women's Project

9. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Justice how many women have been diverted from custody as a result of the Inspire model. (AQO 3723/11-15)

Mr Ford: Inspire aims to reduce offending among women through community-based interventions that address the complex needs and issues that contribute to their offending behaviour. I should explain that, through Inspire, probation, working with NIACRO and the Women's Support Network, supervises and supports women serving community sentences and women who are subject to supervision upon their release from custody.

The number of women serving community sentences under supervision through Inspire was 133 in 2010, 171 in 2011 and 188 in 2012. In addition, supervision and support were provided to 12 women in 2010, seven in 2011 and nine in 2012, upon their release from custody.

Inspire achieves very good outcomes and is highly regarded for its work, winning a Justice in the Community award in 2011 and a Butler Trust commendation in 2012. That is why I am committed to rolling the Inspire model out across Northern Ireland as the norm for dealing with women offenders.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his

answer. Have there been any incidents of offending by women after they have been involved in the programme?

Mr Ford: I fear that Mr Lynch has asked one of those impossible questions. The question of offending, as opposed to detecting offending, is even more difficult. I cannot give him any hard statistics on that. However, I can say that those who run the project — probation and its partners in the voluntary sector — are entirely convinced that it is beneficial and helps to meet what are frequently complex and difficult needs for women offenders and does so in a way that is gender-specific and extremely beneficial. Although I hesitate to suggest that there has been no further reoffending, the evidence is that it makes a very positive contribution to the life of women as they leave custody.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister tell us whether the Inspire model will also play a part in the development plans for the replacement women's prison that the Minister announced before Easter?

Mr Ford: In simple terms, the Inspire model will effectively be the basis on which much of the services for women will be provided. As Members know, one of the virtues of being a small jurisdiction is that we can think in slightly different ways. Although we have relatively few women in custody and perhaps an even smaller group that requires custody, the opportunities are there to combine custodial and community facilities for offenders in a way that gives a lead from the Inspire model. I hope, as I have reported in the estate strategy, that that will see us engaging in a further building programme to provide a small custodial facility alongside community facilities for women, potentially in the grounds of the Hydebank Wood estate.

PSNI: Personal Security

10. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on negotiations with the Treasury on additional funding for security for members of the PSNI. (AQO 3724/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department does not liaise directly with the Treasury. The Department of Justice is fully briefed on the PSNI's emerging financial estimates. My officials will continue to work closely with the Police Service and with DFP, which is responsible for liaising with the Treasury, to ensure that sufficient resources are made available for the Police Service to continue to carry out effective policing in the coming years.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister advise on the current security threat to PSNI officers?

Mr Ford: We are all aware that the current level of security threat is severe in Northern Ireland. We have seen recent examples where extremely good policing has stopped attacks being carried out and has disrupted and deterred them, and I have no doubt that that work will continue. That work is there in part because of the additional security funding that was provided for this CSR period, and discussions will have to continue as we examine the needs for the future.

Mr McMullan: Has the Minister asked the British Treasury to allow extra funding to make up the £25 million that, in essence, has been wasted on public order events in Belfast?

Mr Speaker: Order. Once again, that is not relevant to the original question. Let us move on.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships

11. **Mr F McCann** asked the Minister of Justice whether he intends to review the remuneration of policing and community safety partnerships with a view to introducing a payment for each meeting attended. (AQO 3725/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 makes provision for the payment of expenses. Members of policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) are able to claim a meeting expense payment that is linked to attendance. The PCSP joint committee is committed to carrying out a review of expenses that will take place over the coming months. I do not wish to pre-empt the outcome of that review.

Mr F McCann: Does the Minister not agree that, in the past, when an attendance allowance has been paid, it has guaranteed a good turnout? Not to pay attendance allowance almost guarantees that there will not be a good turnout at the meetings.

Mr Ford: That may or may not be the case, but I have never judged the success of meetings by attendance, more by the quality of engagement.

Magherafelt Courthouse

12. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the efficiency savings which will be

made as a result of the closure of Magherafelt courthouse. (AQO 3726/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is estimated that closing Magherafelt courthouse will save £58,100 in annual operating costs. Those savings will be achieved mainly through a reduction in service charges and utility costs. In addition, it has been estimated that the capital spend to maintain Magherafelt courthouse and meet Disability Discrimination Act requirements would be £455,600. That would be an unfunded capital pressure on a reducing Courts and Tribunals Service budget. However, as I indicated in a previous answer to the Member, my decision to close Magherafelt courthouse was predicated on the need to deliver efficiencies within a challenging economic environment. We need to respond effectively to the CJINI report on the courts estate and the Justice Committee report on victims and witnesses, both of which emphasised the importance of providing better services and facilities for victims and witnesses.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister will not be surprised at my disappointment at the decision. However, the decision has been taken. Can the Minister update the House on the estimated value of the courthouse? Does he think that it will take some time for it to sell in the current climate?

Mr Ford: Clearly, I cannot give the Member the detail of the estimated value. Now that the courthouse is surplus to requirements, it will be offered, as is the case with Larne and Bangor courthouses, to other public sector organisations to establish whether there is a public sector requirement. If not, it will be put on the open market.

Matter of the Day

Baroness Thatcher

Mr Speaker: The Rt Hon Peter Robinson has been given leave to make a statement on the death of former Prime Minister Baroness Thatcher, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24.

If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their places and continue to do so. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter.

3.30 pm

Mr P Robinson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to use this procedure to express the sadness of my colleagues at the passing of Baroness Thatcher and to send our condolences to her family and close friends. Unquestionably, Margaret Thatcher, as she is best known to us all, was probably the most significant Prime Minister of the United Kingdom since Winston Churchill, and, along with Ronald Reagan, she played a key role in ending the Cold War and defeating communism.

Perhaps unfairly, I often look at politicians on the basis of whether they are time-servers or whether they are politicians of conviction who want to transform society, and I do not think that anyone looking at the life of Baroness Thatcher could reach any conclusion other than that this was somebody who entered politics to make a difference. Of course, there will be people who will have their own views as to whether that difference was good or ill. In my view, in the scenario that she was born into and the situation that pertained in 1979 when she became Prime Minister — indeed, the United Kingdom's first woman Prime Minister — she was faced with circumstances where, had they not been tackled economically, the United Kingdom was heading for broke. Therefore, I think that she played a positive role in transforming society in the United Kingdom.

In Northern Ireland terms, it might seem peculiar that I am standing at the Dispatch Box making positive comments about Margaret Thatcher, given that some of the harshest comments in the House of Commons about Margaret Thatcher came from me. Indeed, I think that I was twice thrown out of the House of Commons for making comments that were regarded as being unparliamentary. However, I was glad to see that, in later life, she regretted

the role that she had played in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Indeed, in more recent years, a mutual friend arranged for me, along with some of my colleagues, to have lunch with her, and we talked about old times, in less conflicting circumstances. Along with a lot of people who are ageing, she obviously was much more in tune with the detail of events many decades ago than more recent events.

Anyone who looks at the life of Margaret Thatcher will see someone who showed a single-minded determination and fortitude. She was unwilling to move to the left or to the right because of the pressures that she faced. I believe that the United Kingdom is a better place for the tenure of Margaret Thatcher, and I send my condolences to the family and wish them every success in maintaining the memory of what was perhaps one of the greatest United Kingdom leaders that we have ever had.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to rise in their place if they want to be called.

Dr McDonnell: I rise to pay tribute to the late Baroness Thatcher. Margaret Thatcher was a controversial and, in many ways, divisive figure in the political landscape on our shores in Ireland, and particularly Northern Ireland. Her politics and approach left her a somewhat hostile figure as far as nationalism was concerned, but although events here dominated and, in many ways, defined much of her time as Prime Minister, her hard line, belligerent and uncompromising approach during the hunger strikes won her few friends among nationalism. There is no doubt that her actions caused great hurt and difficulty and added to the difficulties. As a result, I and many others perceived her as an extremely divisive figure. Indeed, my party colleagues clashed politically with her on many occasions over our differing views on how to achieve a peaceful solution to the situation in Northern Ireland. However, with the help of significant American influence, she had the strength in the mid-1980s to stand up to unionist intransigence and sign up to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That was a very significant move and a foundation stone in beginning the peace process, which culminated in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, without which none of us would be here today.

I pay tribute to Mrs Thatcher in that she was a woman. Indeed, she was a formidable woman and a formidable opponent for the many who crossed her. She was a woman who broke through into the highest level of politics, despite the various barriers and glass ceilings. So, although I might not have agreed with her on much of the detail, I admired her courage and

drive in making that breakthrough and the success generally that she achieved. I extend my sympathies to her family as they are bereaved and grieve.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, Labhair Gerry Adams, uachtarán Shinn Féin, ar maidin faoi bhás iar-Phríomh Aire na Breataine, Margaret Thatcher. Earlier today, the Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, spoke on behalf of republicans and nationalists when he commented on the death of the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. I wish to reaffirm that position this afternoon:

"Margaret Thatcher did great hurt to the Irish and British people during her time as British Prime Minister. Working class communities were devastated in Britain because of her policies. Her role in international affairs was equally belligerent whether in support of the Chilean dictator Pinochet, her opposition to sanctions against apartheid South Africa; and her support for the Khmer Rouge.

Here in Ireland her espousal of old draconian militaristic policies prolonged the war and caused great suffering. She embraced censorship, collusion and the killing of citizens by covert operations, including the targeting of solicitors like Pat Finucane —"

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney:

"— alongside more open military operations and refused to recognise the rights of citizens to vote for parties of their choice.

Her ... efforts to criminalise the republican struggle and the political prisoners is part of her legacy."

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney:

"It should be noted that in complete contradiction of her public posturing, she authorised a back channel of communications with the Sinn Féin leadership but failed to act on the logic of this.

Unfortunately she was faced with weak Irish governments who failed to oppose her securocrat agenda or to enlist international support in defence of citizens in the north.

Margaret Thatcher will be especially remembered for her shameful role during the ... hunger strikes of 1980 and '81."

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney:

"Her Irish policy failed miserably."

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the First Minister for bringing the matter to the House.

Baroness Thatcher was a colossus, not just of politics but of conviction politics. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party would not have agreed with everything, particularly the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which gave undue control over our affairs to a foreign nation. It is a matter of record that she was Prime Minister for well over a quarter of the time that we call our Troubles. During her years as Prime Minister, over 1,000 people lost their life as a direct result of the Troubles; 1,062, according to 'Lost Lives'. No doubt it would have been many, many, many more had it not been for her very unbending stance against terrorism. Northern Ireland has reason to be eternally grateful for that stance, not least during the hunger strikes, when Northern Ireland was taken to the brink of something catastrophic.

I had already noted with regret the statement of absolute bitterness from the Sinn Féin president, Gerry Adams, who said — and I will repeat the Member's quote:

"Margaret Thatcher did great hurt to the Irish and British people during her time as British Prime Minister. Working class communities were devastated".

Republicans did great hurt to working-class communities. You are responsible for the lion's share of the 1,062 murders during Mrs Thatcher's time as Prime Minister. Your statement also conveniently forgets how much Mrs Thatcher did for political freedom and human rights, not least for the people of eastern Europe. Yes, Mr McCartney, for the people of

eastern Europe, and for those of the Falklands where she enforced the principle of consent, a matter —

Mr Speaker: Order. Address your remarks through the Chair.

Mr Nesbitt: I beg your pardon, Mr Speaker.

She was rigid in enforcing the principle of consent in the Falklands, no matter how few were affected, how far away it was or the cost to the country.

Whatever you thought of her as a politician, she was a remarkable public servant who stood by her beliefs and courageously fought against the odds on the national, European and world stages. Her list of achievements is mighty. She was the UK's first female Prime Minister, and she led her party to three successive election successes, transforming the economy and changing the British political system.

The Ulster Unionist Party expresses its condolences to her children, family and friends, and joins with so many in acknowledging her massive impact — her positive impact — not only in Northern Ireland or the UK but on global politics.

Mr Ford: I will add a few words on behalf of my colleagues. There is absolutely no doubt that the legacy of Baroness Thatcher, Margaret Thatcher, has had a lasting impact on all parties in this region, as elsewhere in these islands, for the past 30 years. She was such a dominant force in British politics for such a long time, including during that 11-year period as Prime Minister.

To slightly adapt the words of the First Minister: Prime Ministers seem to be either transformational or managerial. There is not the slightest doubt that Margaret Thatcher was transformational. She was a conviction politician who knew what she wanted and set about getting it, and there is no doubt that that led to her being a very divisive figure in domestic politics and, indeed, we have just had that played out by the two Members who spoke previously. She had significant numbers of supporters, and also of detractors; yet, we have also to look at her in different contexts. For example, she stood up for the people of the Falklands and their rights to self-determination, and she played a very significant part in bringing down the Iron Curtain and transforming the whole of central and eastern Europe. Those achievements will be remembered for a very long time.

I and many of my colleagues would certainly have disagreed with the work that Baroness Thatcher did in many areas. We would probably have disagreed with her over different things from those which Peter Robinson disagreed with her over. However, I want to add our commendation for the work that she did when she reached the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985, not necessarily because it was a particularly successful agreement, but because it was a key stepping stone of working together between the British and Irish Governments, in a way which led us, through the various other agreements, to where we are now. We should recognise that. Whatever we think of the failings at that particular point, there was a commitment to establish peace in this region, and that should be commended.

We should also recognise that she was very significant as the UK's first, and so far only, female Prime Minister. In that sense, she shattered the glass ceiling, and that will have an effect for generations to come.

On behalf of the Alliance Party, I offer our sympathy to her family and friends.

Mrs Foster: I just want to mark the passing today of our first great female Prime Minister. She was that, but she was also a wife and mother, and I pass my sympathy on to her children and the wider family.

As the First Minister said, she was single-minded and determined. She often had to move ahead with what she believed, despite the fact that she was being attacked not only from without her own political party but from within it. However, she stayed firm to the course that she believed in, and I think that there is much to admire in that.

Republicans, of course, saw her as a target right from the beginning of her premiership, and she found the callous murder of her political ally Airey Neave a very hard and difficult issue to deal with. However, she kept firm in her resolve, and republicans tried to murder her, too, at her party conference back in 1985.

Despite the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which of course she later said that she regretted and that she had been misled into signing, she was a unionist and, as the Prime Minister said today, a great Briton. She stood with the people of Enniskillen after the murders in 1987 of 11 people at the poppy day massacre. That was just 25 years ago last November, and it is something that this House should remember well.

I found her to be a tremendous advocate, a tremendous thinker and an unashamed free marketeer — something that I greatly admired in her. Her passing marks the end of an era for British politics. She was always there when I was growing up, and she was part of my generation. She was a towering figure. Her place in history is assured, and it will be a positive history for all of that.

3.45 pm

Before I sit down, I want to reference the fact that she showed the world and, in particular, the British establishment that politics was not just the reserve of the male of the species. She broke through that and showed what a great Prime Minister she was. I thank her for that, and I certainly mourn her passing today.

Mr Allister: I join those who have expressed condolences to the wider Thatcher family and to her friends on the passing of Baroness Thatcher. Undoubtedly, Margaret Thatcher was one of the political giants of our time, and that is demonstrated no more pointedly than by comparing her with those who have succeeded her in the office of Prime Minister of this nation. This nation is the poorer for her passing, and I salute many of her achievements. Of course, no one agreed with everything that she did — I certainly did not. Indeed, it is an unfortunate blot on her relationship with Northern Ireland that she ever signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The extent to which she came to regret that is to be welcomed. However, she led a nation where others would have trembled. I think particularly of how she led this nation in the Falklands crisis and how, with the stoic determination that bore out her title "the Iron Lady", she faced down aggression. It was the same determination that caused her, initially, to face down the hunger strike demands in Northern Ireland. The bitterness, the churlishness and the vindictiveness with which some of that ilk have spoken on this day of all days about Margaret Thatcher says more about them than it does about Mrs Thatcher, and they should hang their head in shame for the scurrilous things that they have said about the lady.

This House is a devolved institution of the United Kingdom. Given the nature of the funeral of a former Prime Minister, I trust, Mr Speaker, that you will see to it that the flag of our nation flies at half mast from the Building, just as it will from the other devolved institutions, and that the proceedings of the House will acknowledge the event should they

fall on the day of her funeral. Many of us are looking to you to ensure that that happens.

Mr Agnew: I pass on condolences on behalf of the Green Party in Northern Ireland to the family and friends of Baroness Thatcher. The Green Party did not share many of Baroness Thatcher's views when she was Prime Minister of this country. In fact, we would have opposed many of the policies that she implemented during her term as Prime Minister. I personally believe that the effect that many of her policies had on our society was devastating, particularly on the working-class communities and the vulnerable in our society. However, it is important that we separate out the political from the personal on a day like this, and we should always pass on our condolences and be respectful on the day of someone's passing. Therefore, our thoughts are with Baroness Thatcher's family and friends on this day.

Mr McNarry: The nation will mourn the departure of the Iron Lady in a suitably fitting manner.

I understand that that, in part, will be through a state funeral, and the nation will give due respect and recognition. Many of us in the House remember Baroness Thatcher, and I hope that some time will be taken to tell our children and our grandchildren about this great, courageous former leader of our nation.

As has been said, Northern Ireland may have mixed feelings over her Government's role in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, her contribution to the United Kingdom as a whole makes her time in office unique, and for me it was a time very well served. UKIP expresses its sadness over today's news, and our thoughts are with her family and circle of friends.

I thank Peter Robinson for bringing the matter to the House. As far as I am concerned, at the outset of the debate, he expressed the relevant opinion of the House, which I readily concur with. Regrettably, on such a day, Raymond McCartney's comments served only to expose the bitterness that he and his party are unable to leave behind. Peter Robinson spoke for the House today; Raymond McCartney did not.

Mr McCallister: Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the debate. I agree with many of the sentiments expressed. As Arlene Foster said, people of our age group grew up with Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister. We were used to seeing her all the time. For many of us, she was the first Prime Minister whom we ever

knew or could remember in our lifetime, so the 11 and a half years in which she was Prime Minister was a truly transformational period. When she became Prime Minister, phrases such as "managed decline" were used about the state of the UK, but there was a change in that outlook by the time she left office in November 1990. Clearly, there was a transformational process during those 11 and a half years.

I note that the First Minister commented that he did not always agree with her on every issue. It is interesting that he entered the House of Commons at the time when she was elected as Prime Minister, so she cast a long shadow, no doubt, over his political life as well. Few people in politics have a legacy that not only changes a generation but leaves a legacy for a generation and will be talked about and remembered. Liked or loathed, she will leave that legacy with us some 22 and a half years after leaving office.

It is sad and unfortunate that certain parties have chosen, on a day such as this, not to set some of the politics aside and express condolences to the family. To Baroness Thatcher's children and close family friends, I join the majority of colleagues in the House in sending my condolences and my thoughts and prayers for the family at this very sad time.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the matter of the day. I ask the House to take its ease as we move into the business that we left before Question Time.

Private Members' Business

Energy: Consumer Advice

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to introduce a one-stop shop to provide free, independent and impartial advice to consumers and small businesses about their energy needs, to focus on saving consumers money and to encourage consumers to move away from fossil fuels and maximise energy efficiency. — [Mr Flanagan.]

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I welcome the debate and the opportunity to respond to the motion. I wholeheartedly agree that, in these challenging economic times, consumers and small businesses need to be able to maximise their energy efficiency, thereby minimising their energy costs.

Many Members made much about our rising energy costs. It is crucial that our consumers and businesses have access to free, independent and impartial advice. Members will be aware that there are a range of providers of such advice. It may not always be obvious who businesses and consumers should turn to for such advice, but I want to touch on some of them.

The motion suggests that a one-stop shop should be introduced. That may appear to be a simple solution. However, the provision of advice for energy needs and energy efficiency is complex and cross-cutting. It involves not only several Departments but several organisations, including Bryson Energy, the Energy Saving Trust and the Carbon Trust, which Mr Newton mentioned. I think that Mr Frew made the point that it is a complicated matter, and he also pointed out that we needed to avoid duplication. That is a key element of what we are trying to achieve, because we do not want to confuse people with what is out there.

A range of information and advice is available in my Department. Members should already be aware that there is a government-funded advice line that is provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and operated by Bryson Energy. A number of speakers said that they would like to see an advice line, so I can tell them that one is already up and running.

We have been a key driving force behind the move towards the cross-departmental approach to the delivery of sustainable energy messages. The development of the overarching branding of Energy Wise, which I hope colleagues noticed over the past year, as well as the delivery of a co-ordinated media campaign have proved successful in increasing the impact of sustainable energy messages.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) has also been involved in delivering recent media campaigns that focus on increasing understanding among consumers on issues such as energy efficiency, reducing energy costs and the support that is available for renewables. That campaign has included a presence on television, billboards and bus advertising, and I think that it has proved to be very good.

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

Invest Northern Ireland also provides tailored advice and training on resource efficiency issues by running workshops across Northern Ireland on energy and waste issues, by providing advice and information and by signposting to online advice to help businesses to implement resource efficiency savings. Likewise, the Consumer Council provides free and independent advice that assists consumers with enquiries and complaints about electricity, natural gas and coal. To help consumers to reduce their energy costs, including those for electricity, gas and home heating oil, the council provides information on energy tariffs and supplier switching that is supported by up-to-date data on oil prices and electricity tariffs.

Members will be aware that the Department for Social Development (DSD) is responsible for energy efficiency in the domestic sector and for tackling fuel poverty. However, we are a committed member of DSD's fuel poverty action groups. Officials from DETI and DSD have been working closely with NI Direct, which is the official government website for Northern Ireland, to provide information on a range of energy efficiency schemes. It is important that consumers and businesses know where to seek assistance about their energy needs. As NI Direct is already in place to respond to customer needs across a range of other government services, it would be sensible to make full use of that service to meet consumers' energy needs. I think that Mr Lunn made the point that there was no necessity to create a new facility, but that maybe we should use the facilities that we have. We are looking to see how we can use NI Direct in that fashion.

4.00 pm

Mr McGlone said that he felt that an independent EPA would be a good way of ensuring independent and impartial advice. We have had the debate about an independent environmental protection agency, and the House decided not to proceed with that. Let me put on record why my party believes that that was right. We are elected here to do a job; we do not hand away powers once we are elected to this place. An independent environmental protection agency would have huge consequences for planning in Northern Ireland. I am sorry that the Member is not here because I would like to hear his views on that. What impact would an independent environmental protection agency have on planning issues, particularly in respect of rural dwellings in the countryside?

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I will give way.

Mr McCarthy: I am interested in your approach to this, Minister. Surely, as we stand, it is inconceivable that the Department can arrive at a fair and impartial decision, when one Department takes another to court. I am thinking about pollution, for instance. The Water Service's sewerage facilities, up and down the country, are regularly before the courts and are guilty of polluting. Is it not in those instances that an independent environmental agency could put a stop to such activity? We want to see a clean environment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to return to the subject matter, which is not planning; it is energy.

Mrs Foster: Perhaps the Deputy Speaker will allow me the latitude to answer that point. The judiciary decides on the penalties that are given out to people who break the laws in our countryside. As I understand it and, certainly, when I was in the Department of the Environment, a very clear demarcation was being put in place in relation to the very effective crime team in the Department of the Environment. I know the lady and others who are involved in that, and I think they do a tremendous job. In any event, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will move on, because, as I said, the Member who raised the point is not present. Unfortunately, Mr Flanagan is not here either, but he made a point in relation to the supply chain and people profiteering in relation to oil.

Mr Lunn made the point that we are at the end of a very long supply chain. That is absolutely right. It is one of the reasons why we need to look at other sources of energy; why we are looking at those renewable targets and making sure that we drive those ahead; and why we should not shy away from looking at other sources, such as shale gas. I know that that is a controversial issue, but that does not stop us looking at the issue and making sure that all the environmental controls are there, because we are at the end of a very long supply chain.

In his speech, Mr Moutray made reference to the very poor weather conditions that we have had. I think we all realised the importance of our energy supplies during that period, when a lot of the country was cut off and we could see what would happen if we had problems with our security of supply in the future. I am in correspondence with the Utility Regulator in relation to the competitiveness of our single energy market. Mr Agnew and others raised the point about the cost of energy in Northern Ireland. We have to try to push down the cost of energy in Northern Ireland for our consumers and businesses. That is certainly what I am focused on, and I will continue to be so.

In closing, I welcome the opportunity to debate the idea of a one-stop shop. As has been said, we have many players involved in relation to energy-related advice and information. More research and consideration would need to be given to looking at the existing provision and utilising fully what we already have. As I have said, I am looking at the NI Direct website to see if that is something that we can utilise. As I have indicated, DETI and DSD's work with NI Direct is, perhaps, a more realistic and cost-effective means of meeting the need that is raised in the motion.

I am happy to debate all these issues. Energy supply and security of supply will be key issues for the House in the next number of years, as they are in the rest of the United Kingdom. We need to grapple with the issues in front of us. I hope that the House is up for the task.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak as a member of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. I welcome the opportunity to make the winding-up speech on the motion. There is consensus across all the Benches in the House that people at home and in businesses struggle daily with the rising costs of energy. It is, therefore, important to reflect on the statistics, some of which have been mentioned previously. In 2008, electricity customers in the North of Ireland endured a

53% increase in the price of electricity. Recently, the Consumer Council highlighted how oil prices had increased by 50% over the past three years. What was clear from the debate is that there is a need to do more. In proposing the motion, Phil Flanagan referred to the ways in which consumers can save on electricity but said that much more needs to be done. He referred to the often disjointed approach on advice. He referred to the absence of information on issues like microgeneration and the need to sustain the move towards renewable energies. He also referred to the need for the service to be independent and impartial — a theme that recurred throughout the debate.

Robin Newton referred to information from a one-stop shop as being very general and, often, not involving specialisms. He questioned whether a one-stop shop would deliver. He pointed out how the SME sector needs more than just general advice.

Patsy McGlone supported the motion's plans to bring forward independent and impartial advice. He referred to how agencies being independent is key and how a properly funded green new deal could help to regenerate the economy. Sandra Overend, quite rightly, referred to the recent labour force survey and the rise in unemployment. She highlighted the role of the Executive. She stated that the motion is not new.

Trevor Lunn, in supporting the motion, suggested that the one-stop shop sounded like an extended Consumer Council. Stephen Moutray thanked Ministers Foster and McCausland for bringing forward initiatives to assist consumers and households. He talked about the need for householders to be more vigilant. He also referred to the INI support packages for business in this regard. He stressed the point that we do not need another talking shop.

Paul Frew welcomed the debate. He focused on what the Executive can do best to resolve the key issue of fuel poverty. He stressed the point that the issue, quite often, is where to go for advice. Again, I suggest that the need for independent, impartial advice was referred to by a number of Members. I suggest that one initiative that could be explored is to examine the European consumer directive.

Gordon Dunne referred to the 70% of householders who depend on home heating oil. He referred to renewable energy as having a key role and said that uptake must be encouraged. He referred to room for

improvement and the need for a simple streamlined system.

Steven Agnew supported the motion. Again, he referred to the concept of free, independent advice as being central. He referred to the need for a one-track policy and talked about the different messages that come from government. The Member also referred to the fact that, if fuel poverty is a key priority, money needs to be invested.

I thank the Minister for her comments and the reference to the range of advice services that are currently available. She indicated that it was a complicated matter. She referred to cross-departmental approaches, which, again, if they are practical in translation, are very welcome. She referred in particular to the media campaign, which, again, is most welcome. Clearly, there is commitment to driving down costs for consumers. Energy supply is a key issue for the House and for people from all of our communities.

I suggest that this has been an important debate at a time when fuel costs are at record levels in the North of Ireland and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable. Any energy policy should examine the European consumer directive model and others, and it must seek to provide for and protect consumers in such a situation. The protection of consumers, current and future, should be the primary objective of DETI and the Utility Regulator. We must begin to place consumer rights at the heart of this agenda. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, in conjunction with her Executive colleagues, to introduce a one-stop shop to provide free, independent and impartial advice to consumers and small businesses about their energy needs, to focus on saving consumers money and to encourage consumers to move away from fossil fuels and maximise energy efficiency.

Adjourned at 4.11 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement

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

Office of the First Minister and deputy
First Minister

Child Poverty Act 2010 Annual Report: 'Improving Children's Life Chances – the Second Year'

Published at 2.00 pm on Friday 29 March 2013

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): We have today laid before the Assembly our second annual report as required by section 12(7) of the Child Poverty Act 2010 on the progress made by the Executive towards eradicating child poverty.

This Report represents a collective response on behalf of all Ministers in the Executive.

We are pleased with the progress that has been made during the past year and look forward to further progress during 2013/14 in line with our commitments in the Programme for Government.



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