

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 23 April 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Tobacco Retailers Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Tobacco Retailers Bill [NIA 19/11-15] be agreed.

In Northern Ireland today, more than 350,000 adults are smokers, and, according to recent survey information, 83% of these smokers took up the habit while still in their teens. Although tobacco is a legal product, it is unique in that it eventually kills one half of its users. Smoking affects almost every organ in the body and is the direct cause of a number of illnesses, including coronary heart disease, strokes and numerous forms of cancer.

Every year, around 2,300 people in Northern Ireland die from smoking-related illnesses. Many more lives are ruined as a result of illness, disability or bereavement caused by cigarettes. As well as the considerable human and emotional cost that we associate with tobacco use, there is also an economic cost. The estimated hospital costs of treating tobacco-related diseases are in the region of £119 million each year. I am sure that Members will agree that that is not an insignificant sum.

Although we have made substantial progress since the 1960s, when over half the population smoked, our smoking rates still remain too high, particularly when we compare them with those in other developed countries such as Australia and Canada. Rates are particularly high in areas of social and economic deprivation, where around one in three people smoke, compared with the average of one in four for the general population. Smoking continues to be one of the main contributors to health inequalities here, a situation that must be remedied.

Last year, I launched a new tobacco control strategy for Northern Ireland, the long-term aim of which is the creation of a tobacco-free society.

Supporting current smokers to quit is an essential element of this strategy. However, only by creating an environment in which future generations choose not to smoke will we see our vision of a smoke-free Northern Ireland become a reality.

I already referred to the fact that the majority of smokers take up smoking before they reach adulthood. Indeed, most smokers will have tried their first cigarette, and many will have become addicted, before they are of a legal age to purchase tobacco products. The reasons why young people take up smoking, despite the overwhelming evidence of the harm that it causes, are complex and varied. We know that children are influenced by the smoking behaviour of people around them: their parents, siblings and peers. External influences, such as the media and tobacco promotion, also play a role.

In Northern Ireland, the latest results from the young persons behaviour and attitudes survey revealed that 8% of 11- to 16-year-olds are current smokers and that one in five children in that age group have smoked tobacco at least once in their short lives. Some 2,000 children here become new regular smokers every year — new recruits to replace the 2,300 people who die each year from smoking. We have to break that grisly cycle, and the survey indicates one means of doing that. It reveals that, of the 8% of children who smoke regularly, over half frequently purchase tobacco products from a newsagent, tobacconist or sweet shop. That is in spite of the legislation that makes it illegal for a retailer to sell tobacco to a person under the age of 18.

My main objective, therefore, in introducing the Tobacco Retailers Bill, is to ensure that the minimum-age-of-sale policy is more rigorously applied by retailers as the proposed legislation will introduce tougher measures for non-compliance. Many Members will recall

agreeing, in 2008, to an increase in the minimum age of sale for tobacco products from 16 to 18. That change in the legislation brought us into line with the rest of the UK and Ireland and also made it easier for retailers to refuse to sell to under-18s as the majority of adults carry some acceptable form of ID.

At present, a retailer who sells tobacco products to a person under 18 years of age is guilty of an offence and liable to a fine not exceeding £2,500. That legislation is enforced by district councils, the majority of which arrange annual test purchasing exercises to ensure compliance. Between 2008 and 2011, almost 1,400 retailers were visited as part of test purchasing exercises. In approximately one in five of those visits, tobacco was sold to an underage child. That is an intolerably high proportion. Although I accept that the majority of retailers in Northern Ireland are responsible citizens and apply a “no ID, no sale” policy, the evidence is that a significant number will continue to sell tobacco products to those under the legal age unless we apply stricter sanctions.

The Tobacco Retailers Bill aims to achieve that by introducing the following provisions. It makes it compulsory for all tobacco retailers in Northern Ireland to register with their local district council, which will assist councils in their enforcement of tobacco control legislation. It grants courts the power to ban the sale of tobacco on a named premises or by a named person for up to 12 months following an application by a district council. An application can be made only if three tobacco offences have been committed within three years. The Bill creates new offences relating to the register, including failure to register and failure to notify of changes. It creates an offence of breaching a banning order and allows for fixed penalty notices to apply in a number of offences, including that of selling tobacco to under-18s.

As is the case with existing tobacco control legislation, these provisions will be enforced by district councils through their environmental health officers. My Department currently provides funding through the Public Health Agency for the enforcement of tobacco control legislation. This funding was initially secured to ensure compliance with smoke-free legislation. We are now at a stage at which smoke-free legislation is firmly embedded. Therefore, resources can safely be redirected towards the enforcement of new tobacco control measures, including strengthened retailer sanctions, without incurring additional costs.

I am also concerned that the burdens on retailers be kept to a minimum. Therefore, there will be no charge for registering, and registrations will be kept on a local council basis. Retailers throughout the rest of the UK are already subject to similar provisions to those proposed in the Tobacco Retailers Bill. In England and Wales, a negative licensing system, which allows magistrates to ban retailers from selling tobacco, has been in operation since 2009. The Scottish system, introduced from April 2011, closely resembles my Department's proposals, in that it includes a registration scheme and allows for fixed penalty notices to be issued for a number of tobacco offences. The Tobacco Retailers Bill includes components of both pieces of legislation and will bring Northern Ireland closer into line with those jurisdictions, resulting in a more consistent approach across the UK.

It is my belief that the Bill will have the combined effect of providing a strong deterrent to retailers from selling tobacco to under-18s and an effective enforcement tool for local councils. Most importantly, the Bill will help to reduce the number of young people taking up smoking and will thus save lives.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I welcome the Bill. The Committee is very aware that smoking is the main cause of preventable illnesses and death — the Minister highlighted that in his opening remarks — killing around 2,300 of our people every year.

As the Minister said, the majority of people who take up smoking do so while they are still in their teens; in other words, before they have reached an age at which they fully understand the consequences of smoking and its addictive nature. Therefore, preventing children and teenagers from accessing tobacco is critical and crucial if we want to reduce the number of people in our society who smoke. Sadly, that stands at 24% of the population.

The latest research shows that 8% of 11- to 16-year-olds are current smokers and that half those children who smoke regularly purchase tobacco from newsagents, tobacconists or sweet shops, in spite of legislation that makes it illegal to sell tobacco to anyone under the age of 18. We also know from the results of the councils' test purchasing exercises that the sale of tobacco to under-18s is occurring. Recent figures show that, in one in five of those exercises, tobacco was sold to an underage

person. Therefore, the evidence clearly shows that a significant number of retailers continue to sell tobacco to children. The Bill's aim is to introduce stricter sanctions against those retailers, thereby ensuring that the minimum-age-of-sale policy is more rigorously applied. In turn, that will make it more difficult for children and young people to take up smoking.

The Bill will introduce a registration scheme combined with a negative licensing scheme. It will also bring in fixed penalty notices for retailers caught selling tobacco to under-18s. Similar schemes operate, as the Minister said, in the rest of Ireland, and in England, Scotland, and Wales. The Committee welcomes the fact that the legislation will bring us more closely into line with how those jurisdictions are tackling the problem of underage smoking.

The Committee is in complete agreement with the underlining aim of the Bill, which is to reduce the number of children taking up smoking. However — there is always a "however" or a "but", but I think that we can get over this — during our pre-legislative scrutiny, one issue arose that was of concern to the Committee. The Bill will introduce a "three strikes in three years and you're out" rule. That means that if a retailer commits three offences of the sort specified in the legislation within a three-year period, that retailer can be banned from selling tobacco. The Committee welcomes that sanction. However, we are concerned that the offences that will lead to a banning order are too narrow.

10.45 am

Currently, the Bill states that the types of offences that can be counted towards a banning order are as follows: not registering a premises to sell tobacco; failing to notify changes to the register; and selling to underage persons. The Committee suggested that the Bill should contain a provision to allow the courts to include a conviction for selling illicit tobacco as one of the three strikes that would lead to a banning order. When the Committee made that suggestion to the Department, the Department advised initially that illicit tobacco sales were dealt with by HMRC under the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979, and that under that Act, someone could be banned from selling tobacco if convicted.

However, when the Committee enquired further into the matter and contacted the Department of Justice, we learned that the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 had never been applied here and that, therefore, no convictions have been brought under that legislation. Rather, HMRC

has indicated that typical tobacco offences are pursued under duty evasion legislation using the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979. In 2012, six people were prosecuted under that legislation here, resulting in five convictions. However, it is not clear whether the conviction also imposes a sanction on that person from selling tobacco products for a set period of time. We have followed that up and have written to the Department of Justice seeking clarification on the matter.

The Department's view on whether a conviction for selling illicit tobacco could count towards the "three strikes and you are out" rule to be introduced in the Bill was that sanctions against retailers for selling illicit tobacco is a matter for HMRC to deal with through its existing legislation. For the Department of Health, the focus of the Bill is the prevention of sales of tobacco products to underage people.

The Committee's view is that the Bill should try to capture all types of tobacco sale, including illicit tobacco. We think that an opportunity is being missed here, and we would like the Department to consider whether there is a way of amending the Bill in order to allow a more integrated approach with HMRC.

In conclusion, the Committee is delighted to see the Bill. We are delighted to see that the focus is on stopping children taking up smoking, and we are extremely concerned at the percentage who are doing so. The protection of children is everyone's business, and we congratulate the Minister on getting the Bill into the legislative programme and into the Assembly. The Committee looks forward to getting further into the detail of the Bill at Committee Stage. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wells: I rise as a very enthusiastic supporter of the Bill, and I congratulate the Minister for introducing not only this legislation, but the raft of legislation that he has been responsible for, some of which has already been passed and is in the system, and which will further restrict the availability of tobacco products to young people.

We have already seen the introduction of a ban on advertising many years ago. We have seen the ban in pubs and restaurants, which has been welcomed by almost everyone. We have seen the ban on vending machines, which is a very recent development. It was introduced quickly and effectively, and there has been very little public comment about it. We have also seen the ban on point-of-display advertising. At the moment, that is being enacted in large

supermarkets, but it will shortly become compulsory in small shops as well.

There were those who predicted that the world would fall in and that there would be Armageddon because we introduced controls over cigarette products, but that has not happened. The public adapted to those new measures very quickly and with very little reaction. I not only welcome what the Minister is doing, I also welcome what he proposes to do.

This legislation is to prevent young people having ready access to cigarettes. We have plugged the loophole of vending machines, where many young people were going into hotels and other establishments and buying cigarettes for themselves and their friends from unsupervised vending machines. We have stopped that, and that is good news. That will mean that it will be much more difficult for young people to go into small shops and try to purchase cigarettes.

As the Chairman pointed out, the results indicate a worrying situation at the moment, as tests show that there is a 20% failure rate when people who are clearly underage go into shops and are able to buy cigarettes. The vast majority of those who consume tobacco products start when they are young. I have only ever consumed two cigarettes in my life, and that was 40 years ago.

I have to say that I found it an absolutely disgusting experience. I threw them in the bin and have never touched them since. Unfortunately, that does not happen for many tens of thousands of young people in Northern Ireland. They get hooked on a habit that not only costs them a fortune over their lifetime but can lead to their death. The figures indicate that we lose 2,300 people a year in Northern Ireland as a result of tobacco usage — 2,000 utterly needless deaths.

As I said in a previous debate, three friends and colleagues of mine — all ladies, as it turned out — have recently died from lung cancer. I can think of nothing as horrible, painful and horrendous for the sufferer and their family as to watch someone die an agonising death from lung cancer. The three ladies started smoking as teenagers and had ready access to a supply of tobacco. They bitterly regretted throughout their lives that they ever took up the habit and spent most of their lives trying desperately to give it up. They were sitting in hospitals or hospices knowing that they were the architects of their own painful death.

We must make it as difficult as possible for young people in Northern Ireland to go down that road. Very few people in Northern Ireland are voluntary smokers. There are very few people who enjoy it and want to continue it. The vast majority are desperately trying to give up the habit and cannot do so because it is so addictive. They regret the day that they walked into the newsagent's or the corner store and were able to acquire cigarettes as teenagers. They regret it bitterly. We have to put up barriers to make it as difficult as possible for young people to get the habit. Therefore, what the Minister is proposing is absolutely right. It is balanced in that there is no charge for registration. I believe that it will not be a burden on the struggling retail sector. I accept that small shops throughout the country are experiencing real problems. Therefore, rather than adding a burden to their shoulders, registration is free. It must be made absolutely clear to the irresponsible shop owners and retailers in Northern Ireland that, if they deliberately sell tobacco products to underage children, the consequences are quite serious.

I am very enthusiastic. I hope that this is the first of a raft of measures to control smoking. We have to try to get this terrible rate in Northern Ireland down, with 29% of manual workers and 31% of blue-collar workers still smoking. There is also the worrying increase in the number of female smokers — girls taking up the habit. Although we have been able to reduce significantly the number of male smokers, in the female sector, unfortunately, the trend is in the wrong direction. Therefore, we need to take this seriously and ensure that people do not endure the horrible experiences that three of my friends have.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: Certainly.

Mr Allister: I empathise entirely with what the Member says. Is he entirely satisfied that the manner in which the Bill is worded will have the reach that he desires? In the language in clause 1 about "carrying on a tobacco business", is there any loophole for someone to argue that in fact their business is a different sort of business and selling tobacco is such an incidental part that it does not rank being called a tobacco business? Might there be a case for wording the clause in such a way as to ensure that it covers anyone, without dispute, who retails tobacco in any circumstances?

Mr Wells: In all the material that we saw in relation to the Bill, the term "business"

encapsulated anyone who sells tobacco products. The number of specialist tobacco retailers in Northern Ireland is less than double figures. There are very few tobacconists, as such, left in the Province. Therefore, tobacco is normally sold as part of a wider retail operation, be it in a corner shop, a newsagent or even a supermarket. So, it has always been assumed that that phrase encapsulates anyone who sells tobacco, not as a primary source of income but as ancillary to a much wider range of products. I know that some hotels, for instance, sell cigarettes. Could they argue that, because their primary purpose is as a hotel, they are not tobacco salespeople as such? That needs to be explored, because I think the intent of the Bill is that anywhere where you can purchase tobacco products will be covered.

We do not want to make it difficult for shops, corner stores and tobacconists to sell tobacco products to young people and have a loophole so that you can nip down to a local social club, pub or hotel and purchase them there. It has to be uniform. It must be difficult, no matter where you purchase tobacco products, to obtain them if you are clearly underage and cannot show identification. It is a useful point, and it is something that we need to look at, but the overall aim must be comprehensive: if you sell tobacco products and you sell them to young people, you are in big trouble. I am sure the Minister will look at that as the Bill progresses.

Mr McDevitt: I, too, welcome the introduction of this legislation. As colleagues have said, the policy objective is, basically, to make it more difficult for people under the age of 18 to be sold tobacco and to improve the regulatory framework and its enforcement on the sale of tobacco, with a view particularly to addressing some of the issues around availability of tobacco to young people. That is fantastic; it is really good. However, one thing that has emerged clearly from the policy briefs that we have been receiving at Committee level in the run-in to the introduction of the legislation is that, although there is no doubt in my mind that the Health Department, the Minister and his officials are very exercised about addressing any weaknesses that there may be on the statute book regarding the regulation of the sale of tobacco, there are other aspects of the statute book that have been in place for a very long time, and you would wonder how seriously they are taken by those who are responsible for them.

The Chair of the Committee referred to the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979. It is pretty serious legislation; it is criminal justice legislation. You would think that, over the past

30 years, we would have seen prosecutions in this jurisdiction under that legislation. You would think that people would have been hauled before the courts for illegally selling tobacco or, to be blunt about it, selling illegal tobacco. Yet, there has not been a single prosecution under that legislation. That is why this Bill will deal with only a portion of the problem.

The other significant portion of the problem is, of course, contraband and illegal tobacco. It seems to me that there is an acceptance in our society that a bit of tobacco smuggling is just ordinary, decent smuggling. It is not. In my opinion, a bit of tobacco smuggling is a bit of active participation in the early deaths of people. It is a bit of drug pushing. It is a bit of playing with the lives of a future generation and seeking to exploit, for personal gain, the addictive habits within us all as human beings. It is not OK; it never will be OK. There is little point in us bringing in lots of statutes in health if we do not take that equally seriously.

We have one hell of a tobacco smuggling culture in this society; we have a very, very big one. In fact, we seized a ton of the stuff at Belfast port in 2009. Last year, £7.6 million worth of tobacco was seized in a single operation. Last week, a defence was presented in court by a lorry driver from Maghera when he was up for smuggling cannabis. Do you know what his defence was? He said, "Sure, I thought it was tobacco". He said that as if tobacco would be OK and cannabis, being a class B drug, would not. You can read it. It is all on the public record. The guy is caught because he has gloves on and he is transferring boxes, somewhere in the continent, from one lorry to his lorry, and he says to the judge, "I thought it was tobacco. Sure, what's wrong with that?" — a bit of smuggling, a bit of ordinary, decent smuggling. We really need to come to terms with that.

11.00 am

This legislation will help to address the issue that exists in some communities where certain retailers do not seem to think that it is their duty to always ask for identification or to make sure that kids do not buy tobacco. That is brilliant. However, it is only a portion of the problem. When we debate the principles of legislation like this, it is important that we think about the problem in its totality. Perhaps, in his response to the debate, the Minister might take the opportunity to talk a little about the need for other Departments and the Executive as a whole to seize the issue.

I lost both parents to tobacco. I make no apology for having very little tolerance of it. When it comes to tobacco and the regulation of cigarettes and tobacco generally, I am happy to describe myself as a bit of a fascist. That is the sort of stage that we need to get to in this society. I hope that this legislation is followed by legislation on packaging. We need to take every step and use every means possible to ensure that we do not rob so many people unnecessarily of their opportunities in life just because of what is perceived to be either a socially acceptable habit or a socially acceptable form of procuring something that will, ultimately, kill you. Therefore, I am happy to support, on behalf of the SDLP, this stage of the Bill. I wish it all the best as it goes through its further stages.

Mr Beggs: Before introducing new legislation, it is important to identify whether there is a specific reason why it should be introduced and whether it will not just add more bureaucracy in the system. The fact that there are 2,300 tobacco-related premature deaths each year among those who smoke that addictive substance is a strong reason why we need to take more action. On top of that, thousands, if not tens of thousands, of our citizens suffer ill health, such as coronary heart disease, strokes and other diseases, particularly of the circulatory system, as a result of smoking. As the Minister and others have said, smoking is a major cause of health inequality. Of particular concern is the number of mothers who smoke and bring their children up in that environment. It can contribute to asthma, low birth weight and a range of other ailments that affect the young in particular.

Smoking is a very addictive habit. It is difficult to kick once someone is hooked. I agree that preventative work, as outlined by the legislation, needs to be prioritised in order to try to stop our young people commencing smoking. Others have referred to research that shows that 82% of people who smoke start when they are a teenager, with 8% of 11- to 16-year-olds smoking regularly. That indicates clearly that there is a problem among young people, who should not be smoking at all according to the law. Certainly, no sales should be made to those young people. There is a clear need to take action in that area and to plug the gap where addiction commences. Resulting health difficulties commence then and materialise in later life.

What is also of particular concern in the research is that 20% of test purchases failed the test: the sellers did not confirm that the person was over 18 years of age. Many young

people purchase cigarettes from local retailers. Perhaps, good money is made from that and retailers can take the occasional fine. That is why it is important to increase penalties and start to make it really serious. I recognise that, if some retailers, particularly the smaller ones, were to lose the ability to sell tobacco, ultimately, it could affect the viability of many smaller shops. So, this could be a powerful tool for bringing about appropriate enforcement and stopping sales to the younger generation. In my opinion, the evidence clearly shows that there is a problem and a need for the legislation, particularly to protect our young people from accessing tobacco. I, therefore, very much welcome the proposal to legislate to regulate the area further.

Three underage sales in a three-year period allows some tolerance, but, if I were a retailer, I would not want to risk my business's viability. Shop owners should be able to protect themselves with relatively little training of their staff. As with alcohol, it is a simple matter of asking the person to produce their ID to ensure that they are over 18. All staff should be able to conform to that, and it should not be unduly expensive for a retailer to provide that training.

I welcome the proposal that it should be relatively simple for existing retailers to obtain a licence by registering with their local council. That would not be over-bureaucratic and would be very reasonable. At the same time, more significant powers would enable better enforcement of the legislation in that area.

I think that the proposal for a fixed penalty system is also to be welcomed. It would be an efficient mechanism that would send a clear message through an initial fine and a first step to potentially losing your licence. It would be very efficient, because retailers and, potentially, councils would avoid court time and expensive costs. So, that proposal has to be welcomed.

Like other Members, I expressed concern in Committee that tobacco offences have been very narrowly defined in this legislation. Other offences involving the sale of illegal tobacco have not been included for consideration. That is particularly important, because, in many communities, tobacco sales are driven not by legal retailers but by access to the £2 packet of 20. Those cigarettes can easily be sold at a profit through normal retail systems or through mobile shops, which appears to be a route that is used in many communities. It is important that everyone recognises that that is a problem and moves forward by taking action against it.

The evidence from the Northern Ireland Audit Office shows that someone who commits one type of fraud is frequently willing to commit another. If you are a criminal, does it matter how you break the law? I would argue that, if someone is prepared to break the law by selling illegal tobacco, they are equally likely to sell tobacco to someone who is under 18. It would, therefore, be appropriate to take this into consideration when determining whether someone is suitable to retain the ability to retail tobacco. Other tobacco offences should be considered in the round in determining whether someone can retain a licence.

I agree with others that HMRC needs to take a much more proactive approach to try to drive out illegal sales. Illegal sales frequently make their way to the young, endangering their health and long-term prospects. That subculture has to be driven out. Much more work needs to be done to educate communities about this. This is not about big government for the sake of big government; it is about improving the lives of some of the most disadvantaged members of our community. It is important that there is increased health education in conjunction with the legislation, particularly in disadvantaged communities, to bring illegal tobacco sales to an end. HMRC needs to use the existing legislation.

If, as I said, local retailers are caught with illegal cigarettes on their premises, why should that not be taken into consideration when determining whether they should be allowed to continue to sell cigarettes? That is important, particularly with mobile shops, because it is difficult to enforce legislation and prevent people selling illegal tobacco. However, if people are caught selling to under-18s or selling illegal tobacco, you can remove their licence and prevent them from selling tobacco at all. It would then be much easier for HMRC to monitor a premises, mobile shop or stall because any tobacco sold would be illegal, which would help to stop the practice. I realise that there will be moving goalposts and that other things may arise, but, as a society, we must do what we can to drive this out and to educate those who misuse tobacco, endangering young people in particular and creating difficulties for our next generation.

Future health costs are also important. Increasingly, as a community, we need to look at preventative work. We need to work out how we can educate people, make everyone adopt better practices and minimise the risk of future health difficulties and expenses to the health system. It is becoming increasingly difficult to meet the needs of the community. Let us bring

about sensible legislation and prevent some of the illnesses that we are bringing on ourselves.

I am pleased that the legislation is progressing. I hope that the Committee will be able to look at it carefully and will be able to refine it and, hopefully, improve it to bring even better legislation to Northern Ireland.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the Bill.

The priority for us all is to reduce the number of people getting cancer in the first place. We all know that smoking causes one in four avoidable deaths in Northern Ireland. I pay tribute to all the organisations in Northern Ireland, from the Public Health Agency down to our local GPs and pharmacies, that work strenuously to get people out of the smoking habit and, in particular, to prevent our children and young people starting to smoke in the first place. I congratulate the officials from the South Eastern Trust — my trust — who just this morning announced a campaign to encourage young expectant mothers to give up the smoking habit and consider the life of their unborn child. Perhaps if those young mothers had not started to smoke in the first place, they would not have to consider their situation in adulthood and motherhood. I congratulate the trust on its efforts.

It is important that appropriate controls are in place for the sale of tobacco, which, as we all know, is a dangerous and addictive product, particularly for our young people. The proposed registration system would allow greater enforcement of the laws on underage sales through fixed penalty notices. We must ensure that sufficient resources and training are available to our environmental health officers and others involved in the implementation. Prohibition orders could also prove to be not only a useful deterrent for retailers but an effective method of preventing those committing offences from continuing to sell tobacco.

Most retailers are responsible and keep within the law. It is regrettable that some are in breach. Indeed, the Minister advised that one in five is in breach. It is because of these failings that the law should be tightened. I think that we would all agree that effective sanctions against rogue retailers and anyone who sells tobacco products to our young people must be introduced.

11.15 am

I fully support the Health Minister's statement this morning. The facts and figures given by the Minister and Sue Ramsey, the Chair of the Health Committee, speak for themselves. As Members, we would be failing in our duty if we did not act to prevent our young people getting hooked for life on tobacco. I fully support the Bill, and I look forward to its further consideration in due course.

Ms P Bradley: As a member of the Health Committee and vice-chair of the all-party group on heart disease and stroke, I support the Bill. We have long known that ill-health outcomes are a direct consequence of using tobacco. We know its impact on families, societies and our health system. We know that the cost is felt not just in monetary terms and in Departmental budgets but by families impacted by the consequences of tobacco use. Therefore, it is incumbent on us, as legislators, to ensure that we do everything in our power to prevent people becoming addicted to this vile drug.

I can call tobacco a vile drug, and smoking a filthy and disgusting habit, because I am one of the 24% of adults in Northern Ireland who are addicted. I started smoking almost 30 years ago as a teenager. I remember that, within a very short time, I had become addicted to the properties of the drug. From an early age, my life has been ruled by cigarettes. I plan my day around cigarettes. I plan what time I get up in the morning around cigarettes. I plan meetings around cigarettes. I even plan the time that I spend in the Chamber around cigarettes. What Mr Wells stated earlier is correct: smoking is one of the biggest regrets of my life.

I also find it very worrying that recent figures show that, every year, as many as 5,000 young people in Northern Ireland take their first cigarette before the age of 18, and some are as young as nine or 10 years old. Therefore, I cannot stress nearly enough that it is imperative that we do whatever is within our power to make the drug as unattractive and difficult as possible to purchase. Retailers who continue to flout our tobacco laws should be dealt with in an appropriate manner, which will be facilitated through the proposed register of tobacco sellers. The majority of retailers in Northern Ireland are responsible and try to keep within the laws on the sale of tobacco. However, for those who decide that the law does not apply to them, especially those who do so regularly, the Bill will ensure that the sanctions are appropriate and can be applied.

Tobacco is as addictive as heroin. Coming off it is difficult, as any smoker will testify. It is important that our young people are not placed

at additional risk by unscrupulous people who supply them with the drug. Communities would not tolerate it if we turned a blind eye to heroin dealers working openly in their areas. We must ensure that those in a position to sell tobacco know that we will not tolerate them working outside the law either. I support the general principles of the Bill.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, welcome the Bill and thank the Minister for introducing the legislation.

Paula adequately demonstrated the problems that smokers have, and I can only sympathise. I smoked quite a lot as a student — you are talking about 60 to 80 cigarettes a day — for a relatively short time. I was lucky enough to be able to give up because I was very involved in sports. I realised that, if I continued smoking, I would simply have to give up sports. I was able to carry on playing sport until a relatively short time ago, so that proves that there is a correlation between smoking and fitness, or lack of fitness in that case. Smoking is accepted as being a habit that is difficult to give up. It is an addiction, and, as I said, I can only sympathise.

Some briefing notes on the Bill were given to Committee members by Cancer Research UK. Those state:

"A registration scheme (working alongside a negative licensing scheme) would strengthen current controls on underage sales, as immediate action could be taken against those selling tobacco to under-18s. It would also help ensure compliance with measures regarding tobacco displays, and would ensure that a comprehensive record of all tobacco retailers was kept, which would make monitoring and enforcement easier for Environmental Health and Trading Standards Officers."

"Policies aiming to restrict youth access to tobacco products can only be effective if they are rigorously enforced. The proposed registration system would allow greater enforcement of underage sales through fixed penalty notices, without recourse to the court system."

The notes go on to state:

"We believe that a comprehensive educational campaign will be required to advise retailers of their new responsibilities and highlight the benefits to them of the new scheme."

We would agree with the statement in the Regulatory Impact Assessment that 'a licensing system itself is not sufficient to ensure compliance therefore a comprehensive monitoring system would also have to be established'."

I also agree with the Chair of the Committee that the Bill should try to capture all tobacco sales, particularly illicit sales. I am also a member of the all-party group on heart disease and stroke, which received a very informative presentation on tobacco packaging from a Professor Bauld a couple of months ago. We talked about Australia, where plain tobacco packaging has been introduced and the impact that that has had. However, the most startling pieces of information to come out of that presentation were that, as packaging has changed, those who manufacture illicit cigarettes have been able to copy it very quickly and that it costs between 10p and 15p to produce 20 cigarettes in a packet that is exactly the same as the legal packaging. You can imagine the profit margin on that. Illicit tobacco sales can only increase. As far as I am aware, a packet of cigarettes now costs around £7, although Paula is indicating that it is more than that. It is quite an expensive habit, and you can understand why people will want to purchase illegal tobacco. The profit margins are huge.

I very much welcome the Bill. I congratulate the Minister on bringing it forward.

Ms Brown: As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I support the Bill's Second Reading.

I am happy to support the Bill, as I believe that it brings positive benefits for society at large to regulate further the sale of tobacco and reduce the number of smokers in Northern Ireland. Although the use of tobacco is in decline generally, smoking among young people, particularly teenagers, continues at a rate that gives us cause for concern, with approximately 8% of 11- to 15-year-olds taking up the habit.

The Bill is a timely and welcome further measure in the Department's strategy for reducing the use of tobacco among young people. That is when most smokers start. In some cases, they are beginning a life sentence. The Bill's aim is to apply tighter controls on those who sell tobacco products and to ensure, as much as one can, the good health of those under the legal age of 18. The Bill seeks to create a register of those places of business that sell tobacco. At present, there is no centrally held register of tobacco retailers,

which makes it difficult to ensure the enforcement of existing laws; namely, fixed penalty notices to retailers who are found guilty of selling tobacco to those who are under the legal age for purchase.

Creating, maintaining and enforcing the register is to be carried out by the relevant local council. The costs for that will not be passed on to the retailer. In my view, that is a good thing, as many small retailers are under enough financial pressure these days. The creation of a register is a good thing and another step in the right direction in aiming to reduce the sale of tobacco to those under the legal age. It also acts as a helpful resource for those agencies that will be charged with upholding the law in respect of irresponsible retailers who continue to sell tobacco to young people.

At present, local councils perform the function of checking whether retailers are guilty of selling tobacco to underage smokers by carrying out mystery-shopper checks, which is proving a deterrent in some cases. I am aware of attitudes increasingly changing as more retailers ask for identification, not just for tobacco sales but for alcohol as well.

We must continue to see further steps taken in reducing the harmful effects of tobacco smoking, never mind the financial impact that smoking has on a health service that is already under severe strain and pressure. As has been stated, reducing the rate of smoking among teenagers is key to ensuring a healthier society. We must also see that those who continue to smoke are discouraged from doing so, and I encourage the Minister to do what he can to see smoking rates continue to decline.

I support the Bill but call for more action against those who sell tobacco on the black market. The Bill will regulate legitimate and responsible retailers, but ignores the black market tobacco trade. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is responsible for dealing with cases of black market tobacco traders — thus it is a reserved matter — we must ensure that a clampdown on legitimate tobacco retailers does not have the effect of pushing children in the direction of counterfeit goods. That trade not only helps to fund and promote the growth of criminality, its effects on the health of individuals are too horrendous to contemplate. I therefore encourage the Minister to raise the issue of the black market tobacco trade at the Executive and with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, particularly given that we are the only part of the United Kingdom to share an unguarded and unchecked land border. I support the Bill.

Mr Gardiner: I am thankful for the opportunity to speak to the Bill and congratulate the Minister for bringing it to the House.

It has been shown that 82% of adult smokers in Northern Ireland started smoking in their teens and that around 8% of 11- to 16-year-olds currently smoke. Although the latter figure has reduced consistently, from over 14% in 2000, it has also been shown that, despite current legislation, a significant percentage of under-18s are able to purchase tobacco from shops. As the law stands, a retailer in Northern Ireland who sells tobacco products to a person under 18 is liable to a fine not exceeding £2,500. The legislation is enforced by environmental health officers in district councils, the majority of which use test purchasing exercises to ensure that tobacco retailers comply with the law.

It is true that most operators operate within the law and apply the "no ID, no sale" policy, but evidence also shows that a significant number of retailers continue to sell tobacco to those underage. That is why strict sanctions must be introduced. Between 2008 and 2011, a total of 1,393 tobacco retailers were visited as part of a test purchasing exercise. In approximately 20% of those visits, tobacco was sold to an underage child. That information was supplied to the Health Committee by the departmental officials.

Let us look at those 1,393 visits that took place over 156 weeks between 2008 and 2011, which represents an average of fewer than nine visits a week over 26 councils. That equates to 0.34 visits per week for each council area or, put another way, one visit every three weeks for each council area, which does not look to me much like a rigorous enforcement regime.

I have no argument with the proposed tariffs of punishment under the new legislation — doubling the maximum fine to £5,000 and creating a £20,000 fine for breaking a ban is the right way to go. My concerns rest with the rigorousness of enforcement. Throughout the Bill's preparation in Committee, I have consistently asked questions about enforcement.

11.30 am

It is also the case that we are lagging behind in this. Legislation on retail tobacco sales has already been introduced, in England and Wales in 2009, in Scotland in 2011 and in the Irish Republic in 2009. Of course we can pass laws, but if we do not create a clear enforcement pathway, the whole impact of legislation will be lost. It would be enlightening for us to discuss

exactly how effective enforcement officers have been in their duties to date and whether there is any variation in performances between council areas. If the councils regard this as a cost exercise, which apparently they do, does that imply that they do not intend to do a great deal about enforcing the Bill when it becomes law in November?

I support the Bill, but I hope that my concerns over effective enforcement are taken on board.

Mr McNarry: First of all, I admit to an interest, but in this case, not a conflict of interest. I am not here for an argument as a smoker. Minister Poots is one of only a few well balanced Ministers in this House able and comfortable with his brief, as he has shown us this morning. *[Interruption.]* Maybe some people would like to step out and have a comfort break at this moment, Mr Speaker, instead of getting too excited.

I welcome the Minister's presentation of his Bill. As I say, I do so as a smoker who enjoys what is commonly called an addiction. However, I do not recommend smoking to anyone. I am quite proud, I suppose, as a father, to have two daughters who do not smoke. I trust that they will bring up their children, my grandchildren, in the same way. Both my daughters consider me to be a great failure for smoking. I was not an underage smoker, or even a teenage smoker. In fact, I got hooked on it as something to do when I stopped playing football and sport. So, I came to it rather late in life compared to what we are taking about in the Bill.

I have to say that my welcome and support for the Bill is that I hope that it may well assist — I trust that it will assist — in preventative measures, particularly for young people prone to underage usage. That is extremely important.

It is fair to say that the Minister's party colleague the Member of Parliament for North Antrim may well have a commercial view, at times overruling a health view. Employment is important in that constituency. If such a factory were in my constituency, it would be important to me also.

Cigarettes are big business. I just came through duty-free at the weekend. I do not smoke the most expensive cigarettes, but the price of cigarettes is horrendous to me. The brand that I smoke is £6.40 for a packet of 20. I bought them for £3.80 in duty-free. That is the type of price I would have paid on the Continent for them, where I saw a culture that was free with smoking; over a glass of wine, over a cup

of coffee, over a meal — before or after, as well. I think that the things we are saying here mean that perhaps we may be able to give some sort of lead. In this case, we are following others, but we may also be able to give some sort of lead to other countries.

As I said, cigarettes are big business throughout the world, but here we must also not forget that they are a serious source of financial booty to the Chancellor. We have to take that on board, with the health aspect of it set against that. I would love to be in a conversation with the Chancellor and the Health Minister at Westminster. I would love to hear what their balance of priorities is. I sense that the Finance Minister would be saying, "We need the dough; we need the money".

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: I will surely.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member not recognise that the cost to our National Health Service of treating those who are suffering as a result of their smoking is more than the revenue that is raised from the smoking, and, therefore, if we wish to look at our long-term provision of health, even in this area, it is essential that we reduce the number of those who smoke in order to reduce health costs?

Mr McNarry: The Member represents a good argument, but I would like to hear the evidence that supports that. I have tried to calculate how much it would cost me to go privately into a hospital to get treatment, as he says I need, put against how much I would have paid if I had been a smoker since the age of 10 or 12 and had been paying the taxes, particularly the taxes that I am paying today on a pack of cigarettes, how many packets of cigarettes I would use in a week and what my contribution is from that, on top of the other taxes that I pay, because I am not a freewheeler. I happen to think that I should pay as I go. I thank the Member for his intervention, but I do not want to be distracted, because I am not here to argue for that. I am only making the points about the amount of bounty or booty that the Chancellor derives from cigarette smokers, and, indeed, the benefits that we in Northern Ireland get from that.

That said, in welcoming the Bill, I would like to say something to the Minister. He is fair, straight and consistent on it, which I respect, but I say to him now, although I do not normally speak on such issues: just ease back on the voluntary smoker. I heard the Health Minister

designate, Jim Wells. Heaven help us if he actually is the Health Minister. God help the smoker, after what he related in the five minutes when he stood up there. I am saying: ease off the voluntary smoker, and, for goodness' sake, let us have none of that nonsense that I was picking up yesterday about banning a person from smoking in their own car. I just find that intolerable. I also find, with my natural affinity with people having rights, that that type of Big Brother or nanny state enforcement is not acceptable to me. Judging by the people, smokers and non-smokers alike, who telephoned 'Talkback' — unfortunately I did not hear the Minister afterwards — it would be hard to find any great number of them who were supportive of banning a person from smoking in their own car. I know that I am deviating from the Bill, but I suppose it is part of it.

I believe that the purpose of the Bill was encapsulated in the Minister's early words, when he said that his aim is to achieve a smoke-free Northern Ireland. Yes, but not, Minister, if it removes the right to smoke. I do not think that that would be your purpose. However, I agree with the aim of a smoke-free Northern Ireland.

We then delve into rights — rights that are recognised by the fact that, when we are talking about the monetary side, cigarettes are legally sold across the counter. As one Member said, the Bill intends to deal with the counterfeit aspect of this business and selling to underage people. So long as cigarettes are legally sold, it is incumbent on the House to acknowledge the right of anyone to enjoy a smoke. That is the main part of my contribution in two parts.

On many issues and from all sides of the House, we have stood up here and pontificated about rights. However, tied to the question of rights — I think that this is the crucial and essential part of what the Minister has outlined this morning — is the fact that this House also has to act responsibly to our young people by explaining fully to them and to their parents why the Bill is necessary.

I trust that that will be what is conveyed from today's debate by the Minister. It is not just about his reasons, which are valid, for the Bill, but about explaining to parents and young people why the Bill is necessary and why it is felt that the House does not want young people getting hooked on cigarettes. If that is the message that the Minister can deliver, the objective is worthwhile.

Mr G Robinson: I fully support the Health Minister's Bill, and I congratulate him for it.

Thankfully, I am not a smoker, but I watched both my parents die at an early age from the effects of nicotine. Given the effects that nicotine has, particularly on our young people, we as legislators have to do our best, by whatever means, to discourage the sale of cigarettes to young and underage people in order to protect them from, in some cases, an early death because of lung disease and other associated illnesses. We must also take into account the cost to our hard-pressed health service of smoke-related illnesses.

My contribution is a short one, but I want to discourage the sale of cigarettes to young people as much as possible, and I want to discourage them from buying and smoking cigarettes, because it can do nothing but damage to their health. That is the message from someone whose parents died from lung disease. I would encourage young people to steer clear of cigarettes.

Mr Poots: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. We have had a useful, wide-ranging and varied discussion in which a number of points have been made. I want to clarify matters again, because a number of Members have raised a variety of issues.

The Bill is targeted at tobacco retailers who are breaking the law by selling cigarettes to underage people. We recognise that the greatest problem that we have in reducing smoking is that it is such an addictive drug that, if people get hooked on it in the first instance, it is very difficult to get them off cigarettes. Many people get hooked on cigarettes when they are very young. They make choices that are not good life choices, but which are, very often, brought on them by peer pressure and everything else. This is targeted at reducing the number of young people who smoke by reducing the availability of cigarettes to them. However, I will deal with the other issues in any event.

11.45 am

The Chair of the Committee, Sue Ramsey, raised the issues of the offences being too narrow and illicit tobacco. Our legal advice is that evasion is an excepted matter. As I said, the aim of the Bill is to reduce the opportunity for underage smoking. A number of Members raised the issue of illicit tobacco. My view is that illicit tobacco is probably the greater

problem we have in terms of smoking. It is available at around £2 for each packet, and up to one third of people avail themselves of that illicit tobacco, so what we are talking about today refers to around two thirds of tobacco sales and around half the young people who buy that tobacco buy it from these kinds of retailers. So, there is another subject on illicit tobacco that we need to challenge.

As, I think, Pam Brown suggested, I will be in contact with the Northern Ireland Office and, indeed, the Department of Justice on this issue. A number of Members asked why there have been no prosecutions under the 1979 Act. That is a very good question that all of us need to know the answer to. Why is HMRC not doing more to go after the people who engage in the illicit tobacco trade? Very often, those people are criminals, and very often, the money that they receive is put into acts of terrorism. So, there are a number of advantages to going after the people who sell illicit tobacco. It is a trade that brings pain and misery to the individuals who they sell the product to. However, very often the assets that they gain from that trade are used to cause more pain and misery for other people. So, I am quite happy to take up the issue with the Northern Ireland Office, HMRC and our own Department of Justice.

Mr Wells, who is no longer with us in the Chamber, confessed to smoking two cigarettes. I have to say that I gave up after my first smoke. I do not know why he had a second go at it, but one did me. He identified a worrying trend, particularly among the female population. I think that we have to be cleverer about how we seek to discourage and dissuade people from smoking. A lot of young women take up smoking because they believe that it will help them to control their weight. There is an element of truth to that, but the downsides are so much more significant. The impact on their health and appearance is very considerable. We need to do more to educate our younger women in particular and to discourage them from taking up smoking.

Paula Bradley made a very, very effective intervention. She spoke from the heart about how she, as a young person, became addicted to cigarettes. She does not really want to smoke and would love to give it up, but the addiction is so strong. We want to avoid young people who are like Paula starting smoking, regretting it in later years but being unable to give it up. I do not condemn smokers; I empathise with them. All of us have our little habits. I love sweet food. As Health Minister, I should not, but I love it. So, people have their different habits and things that they like. Some

people have got into the habit of smoking. The nicotine is hugely addictive, and those people cannot get off it. Let us not go around condemning smokers. Let us help smokers to come off smoking, and let us work with young people to ensure that they do not take up the habit in the first place.

Mr Allister intervened during Mr Wells's contribution to raise an issue about the wording of the Bill. The wording is dealt with in clause 22, which defines a tobacconist, general retailer, supermarket, market stall or mobile shop. All that should be covered in clause 22, which states that premises includes:

"any place and any vehicle, vessel, stall or moveable structure".

It also states:

"'tobacco business' means a business involving the sale of tobacco or cigarette papers by retail."

Those words should cover all those issues. However, we are happy to discuss that with our legal advisers to ensure that there are no loopholes because we certainly do not want to leave any. I welcome the fact that the matter was raised.

Mr McDevitt also referred to the Tobacco Products Duty Act 1979 and asked why no prosecutions have arisen from it. That is an entirely reasonable question, which, as I said, I will pursue.

Mr Beggs said that 20% of test purchases fail, which is significant. If it were identified that 20% of people driving on a road into our city were exceeding the speed limit dramatically, the police would be there very quickly because it would be a great source of revenue, and lots of people would get penalty points as a consequence. A large number of retailers — not the majority by any means, but a significant minority — are engaging in illegal sales and taking a chance. Hopefully, legislation that can affect their businesses will lead them to the realisation that it is wrong to sell cigarettes to young people, that they should make every effort to ensure that that does not happen in their businesses and that they should clamp down on that activity.

Mr McCarthy spoke about training for environmental health officers. The Department will work with district councils to produce comprehensive guidance for our environmental health officers to ensure effective enforcement of the legislation. There will be regular

meetings between officials from my Department and representatives of the tobacco task group, which is made up of environmental health staff. That will ensure that any additional training requirements over and beyond the guidance are identified.

Sam Gardiner referred to enforcement being effective. I agree that there is no point in our sitting here making arguments, creating legislation and putting the powers in place for them not to be enforced. I admit that there are differences between our councils on levels of enforcement and the effectiveness of the councils. When we pass tobacco control legislation, it goes out to our local authorities. New service level agreements between the Public Health Agency (PHA) and district councils seek to address those issues and align funding with the level of council enforcement. I encourage those who are still double-jobbing, which is not a crime, although the Environment Minister is going to ban it — you can carry out any job apart from that of an MLA and be a councillor — to encourage their councils to ensure that there is effective enforcement and consistency. I also urge other MLAs to encourage their council colleagues in the same vein.

Mickey Brady referred to a comprehensive education campaign on legislative compliance to support retailers. The Department intends to commence an awareness-raising campaign some months in advance of the legislation being introduced so that it does not come as a shock to anybody. That will be led by the PHA and assisted by environmental health staff on the district councils. The aim of any campaign will be to make sure that retailers are aware of the new requirements to register and of the increased sanction for repeated sales of tobacco to those who are underage.

Pam Brown spoke about the black market, and I believe that there is scope for closer working between my Department and the Department of Justice and its agencies. In England, there have been protocols between HMRC and local authorities, and I want something similar to be introduced here. I will make it absolutely clear: I think that HMRC has shown far too lenient an attitude to a range of issues, such as tobacco and oil, and it is time that the people who commit these crimes were brought before the courts, prosecuted and imprisoned for their activities. It is not conducive to good governance if people can go about breaking the law with impunity, and it is time that HMRC wakened up to that fact. It is not a matter for the House, but it is still a matter of public

concern and, therefore, a matter that Members should not ignore.

I thank Mr McNarry for his very kind initial remarks, and I know that that view has widespread support in the House. *[Interruption.]* It is worth a try. In any event, Mr McNarry raised the issue of people's right to smoke. They do have a right to smoke. People have the right to make good and bad choices in life. If you are not harming others, smoking is a choice that you are entirely free to make.

There can be some debate about harm to others, and we had a debate on people smoking in restaurants and in public places. After that debate, a decision was arrived at, and an overwhelming majority of people would now say that it was the right decision. I was on holiday a couple of years ago in a restaurant when I smelt smoke rising. I was almost ready to tell the person to stub it out because they were breaking the law when I realised that I was not in my country and that it would be inappropriate. However, it brought back to me what it used to be like, when people regularly sat in restaurants and cafes next to other people's children and blew their unwanted smoke all over the place. That was doing harm to others. I do not intend to infringe anybody's right to carry out a legal activity — smoking is a legal activity — but I want to help and encourage people and dissuade them from taking up smoking in the first place, and I want to give every assistance to those who smoke and want to give up. That is reasonable because it is to the benefit of the public.

Mr McNarry is probably right that smoking is a bit of a cash cow for the Treasury. It probably brings in more money from smoking than it expends. Nonetheless, objectively, we want a smoke-free Northern Ireland. It will not happen in my lifetime; nor will it happen because we do one single thing. However, incrementally, we can take steps that encourage the proper observation of the law, which is what this legislation is about, to move forward. Valid concerns have been raised and can be dealt with at Committee Stage, and I am happy to look at how we can amend the legislation to improve it, if that can be done. My officials will work very closely with the Committee on that. I commend the legislation to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Tobacco Retailers Bill [NIA 19/11-15] be agreed.

Private Members' Business

Economic Initiatives and Sustainable Employment

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

Mr Boylan: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to target resources towards economic initiatives and sustainable employment to ensure a reduction in the numbers of young people, apprentices, graduates and skilled workers who are emigrating to seek employment opportunities elsewhere.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo. This is a debating chamber, and part of the reason that I tabled the motion is for debate and to bring forward new ideas. I want to start by going back to 1973. I was lucky to be reared with five brothers and four sisters. Between 1973 and 1993, my mother watched as all 10 of us left the country for work. It was only when I saw a recent BBC programme — UTV also aired a report — that it brought it all back to me about how heartbreaking it must have been. There is one thing that my mother did not do: stand in our way. She wanted us all to do better.

12.00 noon

I will wind the clock forward 20 years to 2013. As public representatives, we attend many events. I happened to be at a funeral one day. I have to give this gentleman some praise, because, when someone comes up to me and calls me "Young Boylan", I take it as a compliment. He said, "Young Boylan, I was on Skype, talking to my son in Australia." This age of new technology is great. He said that his son was with his partner at a function in Melbourne. He walked into an entertainment facility, and, within half an hour, he had talked to 40 young people from his area. He knew at least 40 people from that area who now reside in Melbourne, Australia. That is part of the reason why I wanted the debate. In the past 40 years, we have experienced all of that. It is a sad fact that, at the minute, it is forced emigration.

The debate is not about criticism of anyone; it is not about criticising Departments, Committees or the contributions of any Members. There was a list of questions, and I thank the Research and Information Service team for its paper. We have to get away from expressions such as "operating in silos". We all know that each Department has roles and responsibilities that it must adhere to, but each Department must also look at economic promotion.

The Programme for Government refers to creating:

"more jobs; more people in work; a better educated and more highly skilled workforce".

That is a theme of the Programme for Government. I have so many papers for the debate. The First Minister answered questions on this in the Chamber yesterday.

I want to get to the nub of all this. It is a sad reflection on us that we do not have a single data source for all this. There are different references, and the research paper states that there is not a single data source. To me, that means that we are content to let our young people go away across the world and do whatever, and, as long as they are out of our hair, we have no responsibility.

I want to quote some figures. The unemployment rate is 8.5%. In reality, it would be different if we looked at the number of employable people who have gone away. In some parts of the document, people say that we are OK because in Europe it is more than 10%. That should not be the benchmark for us. I want to put that on record, but I have read various press statements about that.

I will talk about a couple of negative points and then move on to some positive things that the Assembly and the Executive are doing. There are still some concerns about apprenticeships. We see young people who cannot get taken on. Employers are not taking them on, first, for insurance reasons and, secondly, because of having to give them employee status. We need to start looking at that. There is so much information about people not being fit for work. I genuinely thought when I started to research this that, up to 16 years of age, people had a certain level of education, then another up to 18 and then further education. In some of the documents, I see that people are not ready for work, and that is something that we need to look at.

The figures for outmigration, as it is now termed, in 2010-11 refer to 13,824 people. In the South, 200 people were leaving each day. I mention the South because I represent a rural constituency on the partition line, and I know a lot of people. It impacts on communities down there as well, so it is not exclusive to here. I want to get the idea and send a message from the Chamber that there should not be forced migration.

I have outlined some of the negative things, and I will now mention some positive ideas. Corporation tax continues to raise its head. The Executive will keep pushing for that, and it will be a key element to growth. We will support the Executive in that. The Executive had a few other good ideas for short-term gains. One of those is the social investment fund (SIF). There have been a few complaints about how it has been rolled out, but I genuinely think that there will be some short-term gains from its revenue projects and capital projects. I want us to look at us trying to bring forward other capital projects. There needs to be capital investment. Other Members are on Committees such as the Committee for Finance and Personnel and have more knowledge about economics than I have through some of the Committees that I sit on, but we need to look at that. If we cannot balance our books, protect our revenues and use them properly in these economically challenging times, we will never be able to do it. We need to look at that. The announcement about the Long Kesh site is something that we can look at it. It will create a lot of jobs, and it is a capital project that will bring benefit.

I mentioned apprentices not being able to get employment and get experience through employment. I see that the Minister for Employment and Learning has initiated a review group to look at that, and that is certainly welcome.

Having listened to debates in the Chamber, the main issue for me is that there are a plethora of people who have been educated at third level in normal subjects such as English, maths and geography. We educate these people for nearly 20 years, and the jobs are not there and were never there in the first place. We need to start looking at research and development, different technologies and different ideas. We need to work with the universities on that.

In recent weeks in the media, there have been complaints about the First Minister and deputy First Minister being overseas. That is natural and is part of what the Executive and the Assembly should be doing. We have to encourage firms to come here and to invest and

not just to provide short-term or low-paid jobs. Some of the figures show that, in the North, we are some of the lowest-paid people, and that is something we need to look at.

Ideas such as investment in social housing and each Department doing its own bit should —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Certainly, yes.

Mrs D Kelly: On the point about social housing, will the Member agree that it is a puzzle and an absolute disgrace that the Social Development Minister returned £15 million in the past number of monitoring rounds and failed to build the social housing that people needed and that would, quite clearly, have created much-needed jobs in the construction industry?

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for her intervention. Each Department has a responsibility. I mentioned social housing, because that is something that the Executive can do. We can bring forward public sector support, retention, investment and all of that.

I will finish with this: we can never get at the private sector or the banking. I know that there are businesses in my constituency which have business and are starting businesses, and they are not getting the support or investment that they need.

Thank you very much. I have run out of time.

Mr Newton: I certainly welcome this type of debate on the basis of the value that our young people are to us and to our economy.

I take a slightly different tack to that of the proposer of the motion. I do not believe that we can come at this from a very narrow base. That having been said, the solutions are not necessarily within the gift of the of Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister. There is a solution or solutions that exist within the gift of the Employment and Learning Minister and the Education Minister.

The one thing I want to say is this: we need to put a value on and appreciate our young people and the resource that they are to the economy. Many are talented, many are well educated, and many could well make a contribution to employers. Often, the employment situation produces circumstances that do not allow them to make that contribution. We have to find a way out of that situation.

We need to find the opportunities that exist, exploit them and present them to our young people so that they gain the skills and personal development that is needed for them to grow into people of much more responsibility. We need to find opportunities for them to take the skills and the education base that they have and commercialise their skills and education, so that they are of much greater value to employers.

There are opportunities that can be exploited. From my previous experience — I am tempted to say, "When I worked for a living, before I went into politics", but I will not — when I was doing some work with DEL, I realised that commercialising the skills of graduates is one of the keys to their future. It is a key and an aspect that employers demand. More and more, employers demand that young people should hit the deck running. We need to look at how we can exploit those opportunities for our young people. The proposer of the motion may be looking at this with some degree of parochialism or a narrow attitude. I say that —

Mr Boylan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I am happy to give way.

Mr Boylan: Obviously, I tried to portray it differently. I said that there was a role for each Department. I know that you have spoken about DETI, but I referred to all the Departments. I want to clarify that.

Mr Newton: I have used the word "parochial". I pay tribute to the Minister and the work that she has done. If I get the chance, I will come back to the work that Stephen Farry is doing.

In terms of the parochial attitude, our young people should be valued as people who can operate not only in a Northern Ireland context but in a global one. The skills that they have, the skills that they bring to it and the skills they will eventually bring to it as they develop will be appreciated globally, not just in a narrow focus. If Northern Ireland is to develop its export base, it has to have people in business who can think globally and act locally. That is where I am coming from. As to presenting an opportunity —

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added onto his time because he took an intervention.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Allowing our young people to grow does not mean that we should confine them to east

Belfast, Tyrone or wherever it might be. It also allows them to think about opportunities abroad. If we plan opportunities abroad, present training for them to take such opportunities and opportunities for them to commercialise their skills abroad, many of them will come back. Others may not come back, because the career that they find for themselves in Australia or wherever may be more attractive than coming back. That is our loss. It is a loss to the Northern Ireland economy, but we should not restrict our young people in that way. With regard to planning for our young people abroad, Martin McGuinness launched a book on helping, as he described it, Irish people — I hope that he means all of us here — moving to Western Australia. That is to be welcomed as a step, but it also recognises the fact that our young people will seek opportunities abroad.

12.15 pm

The apprenticeship training scheme was mentioned, and it has two aspects: the employer-led apprenticeship, which has an 82% success rate of young people moving from apprenticeship into employment and the programme-led apprenticeship, where we are failing —

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

Mr Newton: — our young people. It has only a 22% chance of apprentices achieving an NVQ level 2, and it is not valued by employers. We need to address that sort of thing.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion. It is an important motion that calls on the Executive to take a more direct line. Any comments that I make will be as a member of the Employment and Learning Committee.

Between 2000 and 2010, an estimated 97,000 people emigrated from Northern Ireland. The societal and economic impact of such a loss over a decade is serious, but the increased number of young people leaving the shores of Ireland since 2008 is absolutely staggering and most worrying. I represent a border constituency, and it is all too clear that young people from Derry and Donegal are leaving in high numbers to go to Australia, New Zealand and Canada simply because they see no future here in Northern Ireland.

I have been a member of the Employment and Learning Committee for some time. It has had a fairly substantive NEETs inquiry, which examined models of best practice to try to

stimulate and encourage young people into other areas. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of young people in Northern Ireland — almost 44,000 — find themselves in the NEET bracket. We have to do things better.

I spoke in the debate yesterday on learning difficulties for those in the post-19 lobby. It was a fairly good debate as regards ensuring that those who are most vulnerable and most marginalised have an opportunity to secure employment. I said yesterday, and I say it again today: we are not doing it right. I take Cathal and Robin's point, and this is not a criticism of anyone, but, because we are in a coalition Government, Departments are not prepared to co-operate and collaborate in a much more fundamental way, as happens in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly. I can say that because the Committee went there and saw models of good practice and case studies where the evidence was clear that, from an educational, training and an economic development perspective, there is joined-up thinking. That, clearly, is not happening here. We have a NEETs inquiry, and we have been told that every effort is being made to ensure that there is leadership on that, but too many young people are failing.

Dolores talked to me earlier about young people, and there have been debates in the Chamber on suicide. Young people feel failed by the system. When they feel failed, they see no future and no opportunities. A lot of young people have, unfortunately, taken their own life because they do not have something. I always say that work is occupational therapy; it keeps the mind going but, more importantly, it keeps the mind of a young person going, a young person who could easily —

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member who spoke previously talked about the parochial aspect and about people who go across the world to gain experience and come back. In normal circumstances, people would go away anyway to get experience. We are now in an enforced situation where people leave because they have no choice in the matter. There is a big difference between that and people wanting to learn and bring something of value back. That is the problem. Do you agree with that?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr P Ramsey: I do, but, too often, we prioritise political battles in the House rather than prioritising the economic development that is

necessary to give a good future. We need to have a much clearer, more focused and more comprehensive approach to maintaining the educational standards that we have. We have good educational standards, but too many fall through the system. The evidence is there, even in the Protestant community. They are not achieving the educational excellence that is required for them to move forward. As I said, we need to do more to ensure opportunities for work — they are few and far between — but, unless they have the education, they will not go anywhere. It is their passport to a career.

I have only a few minutes left. OFMDFM is the lead sponsoring body for the Ilex project in the city of Derry. One of the key elements of that project is the expansion of Magee university, and — I say it again in the House — it will be the most important economic regeneration project ever to take place in the city. It will provide a future for many of our young people who are moving across the water for education, and it will stimulate industry in the private sector. We have been failed on the student numbers that were promised by successive Governments, which were in the One Plan and which OFMDFM agreed to, on the principal point of an immediate 1,000 students and going up to 10,000 full-time students for Derry.

I want to finish on this point. The A5 project in the north-west would have stimulated incredible growth in the construction industry. It would have created immense employment opportunities for the same young people who were failed by the system, and it would have created greater apprenticeships, which Robin referred to, whether in young people's apprenticeships or adult apprenticeship programmes.

I thank the Members for tabling the motion. The SDLP fully supports it, but we need more joined-up thinking from the Executive.

Mr Copeland: In rising, I will state that I have never lived any further than eight miles from the place where I was born, so the position that I adopt in this debate should not come as any surprise. The Ulster Unionist Party has no issues with supporting the motion.

The concern that our young people — apprentices, graduates and skilled workers — are emigrating to other countries to find jobs is a serious one for the Assembly and for everyone connected with it. The problem is not new. Reg Empey commissioned research when he was Minister for Employment and Learning a number of years ago, but it remains something that we have yet to get to grips with.

Perhaps this debate will lead to greater understanding of the reasons why people leave these shores and focus their future in other places.

To put it in context, first, I want to deal with the reasons why people decide that, having grown up in Northern Ireland and benefited from what is here, for some reason, their future lies elsewhere. From the current labour market statistics, it can be seen that unemployment recently reached 8.5%, which is the highest rate since 1998. The unemployment rate for young people aged between 18 and 24 was 23.8%, which is the highest since records began in 1995. The claimant count, which is people claiming unemployment-related benefits, is increasing monthly and currently stands at 64,900. That is 64,900 people who have no realistic prospect of securing gainful employment or the self-respect or economic independence that flows from that.

The productivity gap between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK continues to widen. Indeed, an economic outlook from PricewaterhouseCoopers in March showed that we are continually slipping behind the rest of the UK in just about every measure of employment, growth and productivity. So, the numbers of young people moving from Northern Ireland must be considered in the harsh context of those economic realities.

As regards the numbers involved, there are sources that can give an indication of the scale of the problem. The NISRA Registrar General's annual report published in November 2012 sets it out that there is no comprehensive system to measure those moving into and out of the United Kingdom, so a series of indicators are used. That shows that, during the Troubles in the 1970s and 1980s, nearly 10,000 more people a year left Northern Ireland than came into it. That was clearly due in no small part to the effects of the Troubles. From the early 1990s until 2004, population movement was balanced, with similar numbers of people leaving and arriving. Yet, from 2004 until mid-2008, immigration to Northern Ireland rose sharply, but it now appears that the position has returned to one of modest net outmigration.

To give some clarity to the debate, we should look at the latest specific figures covering 2010 to 2011. During that period, almost 25,000 people left Northern Ireland to seek a future elsewhere. As you might expect, 45% went to Great Britain, and the remainder went to countries outside the United Kingdom. It is also apparent that the Belfast City Council area was most affected by a net outflow of young people

between the ages of 20 and 29. So, although it is true that net emigration is less than in previous decades, it remains a matter of great concern.

The question remains of how we deal with the problem. The answer, with which all in the House will no doubt agree, is to rebalance the economy and create jobs, with a focus on tackling youth unemployment. Unemployment festers in and has implications in youth that it does not to the same degree elsewhere. If we can learn anything from migration levels in Northern Ireland over the past 40 years, it is that, when times are bad, people will leave and that, conversely, they will stay when times are good and opportunities are present. The failure thus far to secure a decision one way or the other in the devolution of corporation tax is an obvious blow and perhaps removes an essential tool from the equipment with which our Executive can confront these issues.

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

Mr Copeland: Almost gone. Sorry, I have very little left to say.

Although I believe that it is right to continue to press the case for control of that economic lever, we must consider all other possibilities. Our youth —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Copeland: Our youth, our investment in the past and our return in the future will be denied us if we are not —

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Lyttle.

Mr Copeland: I apologise.

Mr Lyttle: I think that the entire Assembly will support the motion and agree that building a Northern Ireland with the opportunities and quality of life necessary to retain talent and compete internationally is one of its key aims.

We have heard concerning statistics. Migration has increased significantly. Jobseeker claimant numbers and unemployment among young people are of serious concern to every Member. The number of young people who are leaving Northern Ireland — apprentices, graduates and skilled workers in particular — is of serious concern. That has wide-ranging consequences for not only our economy but our community and, indeed, our aim of building a more knowledge-based economy.

I welcome measures that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister for Employment and Learning have taken on the issue, in particular the £9 million investment in a collaboration and innovation fund to assist our young people into education, training and job opportunities. I also welcome a £40 million investment in the youth employment scheme to upskill our young people and provide opportunities for meaningful work experience. I welcome the extra university places and the increased number of PhD places that have been created. Those are essential in commercialising our unique selling point: the knowledge and skills of our people. Companies are seeking to attract and retain highly qualified talent, and it is vital that we are able to provide such qualified people.

12.30 pm

Corporation tax-setting powers are a concern. In the absence of such powers, we have to look to build on our existing economic strategy. We have to innovate more, export more and employ more.

I move now to the long-term measures that we should take. As a member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I understand the importance of ensuring that career guidance for our young people is as robust and accurate as possible. The labour market is shifting towards technology, the sciences and ICT. We need the resources to ensure that our young people, from the earliest age, make the right decisions regarding their career. We also need to ensure that those young people have the skills needed to compete in the international labour market.

Some of our graduates who have worked hard and, indeed, invested in their future face difficult employment circumstances that can affect their health and can lead to mental health issues. The young people who are detached from our labour market have been involved in difficult circumstances, and we have to react to those. We need to ensure that we create a competitive and sustainable job market that has opportunities for everyone.

In order to recruit and train the talent, we need to be able to offer a labour market with a good quality of life, where division and segregation are part of the past. We need political parties to work together to build the framework and the shared society in which we can create those opportunities.

I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments on the potential developments of the economic strategy with regard to enterprise

zoning, building on existing knowledge transfer partnerships, looking at enhanced research and development tax credits to improve and develop our intellectual property and accessing financing and banking for our businesses.

It is essential that we rebalance our economy and create jobs for our young people. My party fully supports the motion.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when the House returns will be Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.32 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. A large number of questions have been withdrawn. Questions 2, 4, 5, 9 and 13 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Economy: Corporation Tax

1. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what implications does the recent announcement about delaying the decision to devolve corporation tax have for the economic strategy. (AQO 3849/11-15)

7. **Mr Weir** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the impact on investment and employment following HM Government's decision to delay any consideration of the devolution of corporation tax. (AQO 3855/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1 and 7 together.

I am disappointed that the Prime Minister has delayed his decision on devolving corporation tax powers until autumn 2014. The Executive remain committed to securing that important additional policy lever. Irrespective of the delay, we will continue to work together to deliver the actions contained in the economic strategy and the more recent economy and jobs initiative. However, it must be recognised that the economic strategy's key objective of rebalancing the local economy would be delivered more quickly if we had the power to vary the rate of corporation tax.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given what seems to be an indefinite delay in the devolution of corporation tax, would the Minister consider introducing proposals for a Calman-style commission to examine what further powers could be devolved to this place to give us more tools to address the economic difficulties here?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. First, of course, that sort of decision would not be for me; it would be for the Executive as a whole. Secondly, the delay is not indefinite. We have been told that, once the Scottish referendum is out of the way, a decision will be taken. I want to say that I think it a fundamental mistake by the Prime Minister not to have made the decision now. Frankly, if I were Alex Salmond, I would use that as a way to argue for independence. I would say that, although the Northern Ireland Executive have put forward a very compelling case in respect of corporation tax, the Westminster Government have decided not to devolve it. If I were Alex Salmond, I would say, "What you need is independence". In fact, I think that it goes contrary —

Mr McDevitt: You should make the argument for independence.

Mrs Foster: I absolutely, most certainly am not arguing for independence — *[Interruption.]* I can join the dots, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, unlike some across the way *[Laughter.]* I am saying that I think that the Prime Minister has made the wrong decision. However, he has just delayed it. We are looking forward to engaging with him on that and on what I have described as "corporation tax plus" — all of the other issues on which we must move forward. I have often said that the economic strategy is a living document that we go back to time and time again through the Executive subcommittee. Our last meeting was on 19 March, and we will get together again in the near future. It is about keeping at the economic strategy and looking at ways in which we can be innovative and, indeed, at the proposals on the economic pact, which have been mentioned. We are certainly coming together on those issues, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister will speak to the Prime Minister again.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for her responses so far. What is her assessment of the impact of the delayed decision on inward investment and unemployment?

Mrs Foster: It will have an impact. We had been planning for this. The Minister for Employment and Learning had put forward a very good paper on the skills that would be needed if we had the power to lower corporation tax. Of course, we had done some work on the number of jobs that would be created if we had a lower rate, and the figures are there for all to see. It would be difficult to achieve those figures without the tool of a lower

rate of corporation tax. Recently, we looked at the Republic of Ireland, which, because of its lower rate of tax, has been able to attract foreign direct investment. We cannot do that because of the tax regime.

Let us be honest: we have achieved a lot without the corporation tax lever. We have done that because of the skills of our people, our young population, our marvellous work ethic and the fact that Northern Ireland offers great connectivity and is a gateway to Europe. We will continue to push all those issues, but there is no doubt that, if we had a lower rate of corporation tax, we would be able to do much more.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given the delay in the devolution of corporation tax powers, will the Minister provide information on what the Executive plan to do to further reduce business operating costs as a way of bringing in further investment and increasing employment?

Mrs Foster: We are obviously looking at other measures. Enterprise zones are constantly talked about in this context, but, as far as we were concerned, enterprise zones were to be seen in the context of the ongoing Treasury work on the devolution of corporation tax. Indeed, enterprise zones in GB look at rating, simplified planning and telecoms, all of which are devolved to Northern Ireland. However, we are exploring the area of enhanced capital allowance to see whether that can be applied to Northern Ireland as a whole.

I say to the Member that one of the biggest costs of operating in Northern Ireland is energy, and the House will have to come back to that time and time again. I visited one of our large companies in the past number of weeks, a global company with installations in the US and Europe. They were very clear with me about the fact that their energy costs in Northern Ireland were second only to those in Italy. That should be a matter of grave concern for us in the House, because, even though it is a very efficient manufacturing company — in fact, it is held up as an exemplar for the work that it has done around lean manufacturing — it has grave concerns about its energy costs. We need to revisit all these things, look at the single electricity market in particular and work with the regulator to see whether more can be done, because I have grave concerns about this at present.

Mr Nesbitt: Following on from the Minister's answer, does she support Bombardier's

application for its own energy plant at Queen's Island?

Mrs Foster: I can fully understand why Bombardier is looking to put that in place. I had a meeting with it in and around the issue of its plant. I wish it well with its application. Indeed, others may be looking at that option. I had a meeting with the Green Investment Bank today, and I know that it is certainly looking at opportunities to invest in green opportunities with Northern Ireland companies. However, if every large company does what Bombardier is doing, the public service obligation (PSO) levy will transfer to the rest of the companies still on the grid. Bombardier is essentially taking itself off the grid, so the rest of the companies will have to pay the PSO levy, and prices will actually go up for them. That is a conundrum that we need to tackle, and I have tasked officials with addressing it as a priority. I met the chair of the Utility Regulator just last week. That is number one on my priority list.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

G8 Summit

3. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what plans she has to showcase businesses to the 39th G8 summit leaders. (AQO 3851/11-15)

15. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on how her Department intends to capitalise on economic investment opportunities generated by the G8 summit in County Fermanagh. (AQO 3863/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Again with your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 15 together.

My Department is working closely with the Prime Minister's office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and local stakeholders to maximise opportunities to showcase to a global audience Northern Ireland's business development and tourism offerings to visiting delegations as a positive place to live, work, visit, study, invest and do business with.

For the many international media who will cover the G8 Summit, a dedicated online presence has been developed. It will provide business and tourism information and opportunities to showcase the Northern Ireland offering directly to the media and visiting delegations. It will

range from the food that they will eat to a number of visit programmes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Simon Hamilton. Sorry, David.

Mr McNarry: Apology accepted, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Minister for her very acceptable and professional answer. She will know that representatives from Outreach Five — Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa — are also likely to be in attendance at Lough Erne. Can she add to her previous answer by saying what access she will have to those important potential investors?

Mrs Foster: We are already meeting some of the forward delegations that are visiting Northern Ireland and Fermanagh, and they are engaging very much with Invest Northern Ireland and the other partners. This is the biggest opportunity that we have had on the world stage. We must take the opportunities, and that is what we intend to do. As the Member might appreciate, there have been many meetings since it was announced that the G8 was coming to Northern Ireland, and I welcome officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Prime Minister's Office to Fermanagh on a very regular basis. We are certainly increasing their air miles to Northern Ireland, and we look forward to working with them to make sure that everything is all that we hope it will be. The summit will put on us on the global stage; not just Northern Ireland as a whole, but our companies and the tourism product that we have here. It will also give us an opportunity to upgrade some of the infrastructure in and around the area where the event is taking place.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Simon.

Mr Hamilton: Better late than never. Thank you, Deputy Speaker. The Minister will be aware that the G8 will put huge pressure on the existing telecommunications infrastructure in Fermanagh. What steps have been taken to alleviate that problem for the summit? Will the benefits of that be long-lasting for the people of Fermanagh?

Mrs Foster: Obviously, there has been a lot of talk about legacy in connection with the G8. I hope that part of the summit's legacy will be the telecoms infrastructure left behind after the event takes place. I am keen that operators seize that opportunity and leave an

infrastructure that will benefit everyone in the vicinity after the event takes place.

I wrote to the chief executive officers of the main telecoms companies encouraging them to review and reprioritise their investment plans with legacy in mind. I view legacy as improving existing mobile services, showcasing 4G, avoiding inadvertent roaming and improving basic and superfast broadband. I am hopeful that it will take place. I have written to them very recently and hope to meet them in the near future to hear their specific plans for the G8.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. It is important that we use the G8 summit to showcase everything that is good about Fermanagh, but will the Minister detail how the G8 summit can take place in a way that will be a benefit to the citizens of Fermanagh rather than a hindrance or annoyance as they go about their daily life in that busy week?

Mrs Foster: Undoubtedly, there will be some disruption. We must try to ensure that it is kept to a minimum, particularly for the young people who will be sitting exams on the Monday and Tuesday. I understand that the maths GCSE will happen on the Monday, so we must ensure that those young people get to their school in time to sit their exam. Obviously, while people can put up with a little bit of annoyance for a couple of days, we do not want to have an impact on young people's lives going forward and prevent them achieving their GCSEs.

We have also met local stakeholders, the council, the Tourist Board, Invest Northern Ireland and, of course, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Prime Minister's Office. We have, of course, been speaking with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and its colleagues to ensure that we will be able to get those young people in and out and that we try to keep disruption to a minimum. There will be disruption — I think most people accept that there will be disruption — but the benefits and lasting legacy that will come afterwards will far outweigh the disruption around that weekend and the two days at the beginning of that week, 17 and 18 June.

Mr McDevitt: Another legacy that, one would think, the Minister and the Executive would hope to see from the G8 would be a significant increase in visitor numbers and the establishment of Fermanagh and Northern Ireland as a desirable destination. Given the importance of many of the G8 countries as tourism markets, will the Minister tell me what

specific steps Tourism Ireland is taking to maximise the impact of this event from a tourism perspective?

2.15 pm

Mrs Foster: Tourism Ireland has been very much involved with our planning. As you rightly say, a number of the countries that will be in the Lough Erne golf resort over 17 and 18 June and indeed before and after it are target countries for Tourism Ireland. It has been working very closely with its representatives in those markets to make sure that it gets standout. When I was in Brussels at the Northern Ireland showcase that took place back in March, I was very pleased that the G8 summit was one of the key elements. That, again, was through Tourism Ireland. It is about partnership. It is about making sure that we all work together to get the most out of this because, as I said, it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Mr Elliott: This is a follow-on to the Minister's answer on communications in the area. I notice that some of the proposals for the mobile telephone communication masts are for temporary masts. I wonder whether the Minister can comment on that. Will she press to have those on a permanent basis as opposed to a temporary one?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to say that temporary masts are being put in place for the event. However, Vodafone has already indicated that it intends to leave any temporary infrastructure installed for the summit there until it is replaced by more permanent arrangements. That is a very good move by Vodafone. The Everything Everywhere investment will ensure that we have good 3G coverage in Fermanagh, something which, the Member will know, has been lacking. If companies are putting in temporary provision, we want to encourage them to leave it there until something more permanent can be put in place. I am pleased to say that that is what is happening with those telephone masts.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

Tourism: Visitor Numbers

6. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the 4.2 million visitor target by December 2014. (AQO 3854/11-15)

Mrs Foster: Despite the very challenging global economic conditions, I remain positive about our prospects for achieving our Programme for Government targets to 2014. Full-year figures for 2012 on visitor numbers are not yet available. However, there are many encouraging indicators of the success of the ni2012 campaign. I am encouraged by a 10% increase in hotel occupancy rates during 2012 and by the excellent first year visitor numbers for new attractions such as Titanic Belfast and the Giant's Causeway visitor centre. We continue to build on the momentum of ni2012, with exciting events happening this year such as the UK City of Culture, the World Police and Fire Games and, of course, the G8 summit in Fermanagh and beyond into 2014 with the Giro d'Italia.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Are there any specific visitor targets for emerging economies such as the BRIC countries — Brazil, Russia, India and China? Further to that, given the British Government's stalling on corporation tax, does she agree that we should focus on devolving and abolishing air passenger duty to increase visitor numbers and boost the economy?

Mrs Foster: Of course, in relation to air passenger duty, we have already reduced to zero the band for a lot of the countries that you just mentioned: Brazil, Russia, India and China. If we are able to get a flight from any of those countries direct into Belfast, they will not have to pay any air passenger duty. One of my clear priorities in tourism is to try to attract more direct flights into Northern Ireland and Belfast. It is important that we continue to push the Canadian market. That is my number one priority, because I feel that there is an open door for a connection to Toronto. We are also very much looking at the German market.

Brazil, Russia, India and China are not priority markets for Tourism Ireland in respect of Northern Ireland. Those are emerging markets. We undertake some work when we go to those countries to heighten awareness. Titanic Belfast has been a tremendous assistance to us in that regard, because Titanic is a global brand. We can talk about it to people from China, Brazil, Russia and India, and they know precisely what we are speaking about. We are proud to have that association, and we will continue to build on it in those faraway markets.

Mr Anderson: The Minister commented on the Titanic signature project. Will she further

comment on the very great success that it has been since it opened in April 2012?

Mrs Foster: The First Minister and the deputy First Minister were at Titanic Belfast this morning to celebrate the fact that 807,000 visitors have come to it since it opened, which was just in April of last year. That is a tremendous success. They have come from 128 countries, from all across the world. That shows the benefit of having a centre like Titanic Belfast.

Just in case we have forgotten, do you remember what the Audit Office said, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker? Do you remember that it said that we would struggle to reach 400,000 visitors a year and that we would need 400,000 visitors to make it sustainable? We have doubled that figure — doubled it. I must pay tribute to the operators of Titanic Belfast for the marvellous work they do. They go right across the world to sell Titanic Belfast. It has been a tremendous success for us, and we should celebrate that today in the House.

Mr Dickson: Minister, given the excellent list of events that you have enumerated to the Assembly, how do you intend to counter the recent negative publicity that has gone around the world with regard to street protests and ongoing dissident republican threats?

Mrs Foster: By being positive and asking people to look at the success of ni2012.

One aspect of ni2012 that really caught the imagination of the people of Northern Ireland was the civic pride part. I was really pleased that it was not just the tourism industry that took on the "ni2012: Our Time Our Place" slogan. I have often said that the Wilson's Country slogan of "Our Time Our Spuds" was a tremendous take on "Our Time Our Place". Apparently, they are at it again for the G8, and I understand that they have another catchy slogan for that. That shows that tourism is everyone's business. It is important that we are all ambassadors for Northern Ireland and that, when we leave this place, we talk it up and welcome people to our shores.

I look forward to repeating the success of events like the Irish Open. We will hold the Northern Ireland Open Challenge in Ballymena this year. As well as that, we have the big events: the World Police and Fire Games and the UK City of Culture, which runs throughout the year. I have had the great pleasure of attending some of its events. Let us be positive and look to the future for tourism.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 7 has been answered.

Social Economy Consortium

8. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many businesses will be created as a direct result of the new social economy consortium. (AQO 3856/11-15)

Mrs Foster: In October 2012, DETI appointed this consortium to design, manage and deliver a three-year social economy work programme. Social Enterprise NI represents a broad range of interests across the social economy sector in Northern Ireland and further afield. The objective of the programme is to identify and implement a programme of initiatives to enable the continued growth of a sustainable social economy sector.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her response. Is she able, at this point, to elaborate on what sectors of the broader social economy have been prioritised for potential growth?

Mrs Foster: The whole point of giving this to the social economy sector was for it to put forward its own work programme, and I have been very pleased with the way in which it has taken that on. It is really being led by the sector itself, although we, of course, have put money into the consortium to help it to do that.

We are looking at bringing forward a mapping report, which is due this month. It is a joint mapping report produced by my Department and the Department for Social Development so that we know exactly what is out there in the social economy and can work on it.

I do not need to tell the Member that there are marvellous examples of social enterprises across Northern Ireland. That is the joy of the social economy. It happens in Irvinestown, west Belfast and in every city and town across Northern Ireland. We want to support the social economy consortium and let it grow in its own way, but in a sustainable way. That is the key element.

Mr Clarke: In relation to the previous question, will the Minister update the House on the development of the financial capability strategy?

Mrs Foster: A draft of the financial capability strategy, which is, of course, part of our Programme for Government commitments — it

is commitment 48 — has been developed. The draft strategy has been informed, again, by a quantitative and qualitative evidence base and by wide stakeholder engagement. The Executive recognise the significance of this issue and the contribution that it can make to the quality of life of consumers and to the local economy. That was recognised by the fact that we included the need to have the financial capability strategy in the Programme for Government. I hope that it will go out to consultation in the very near future.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister detail what action she has taken, perhaps in conjunction with the Minister of Finance and Personnel, to ensure that the social economy can avail itself of opportunities in the significant public procurement spend?

Mrs Foster: That, of course, is being looked at in some detail by the Committee for Finance and Personnel, and the question is probably more one for the Minister of Finance and Personnel. However, we would very much like to see more use made of the social economy in public procurement, because we believe that there are many sectors in which the social economy could deliver a better and more local service in an efficient and effective way. I want to see the social economy involved in public procurement, but perhaps the Member will ask the question again of the Minister of Finance and Personnel after 2.30 pm.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 9 has been withdrawn.

Energy: System Charges

10. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what the Utility Regulator can do to reduce system charges for large energy users. (AQO 3858/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I am very aware of the effect of electricity costs on large energy users. I recently met the chair of the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation to personally express my concerns regarding the matter. Following the recent publication of the pricing data comparison report, I asked the Utility Regulator to prioritise detailed analysis of the reasons for the high costs experienced by industrial consumers in Northern Ireland.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answer so far. I note that she referred to the high energy costs in answer to a previous question.

Will the Minister encourage the regulator to set about establishing the potential for a working group or a committee to look at this important issue, which she referred to previously and in answer to this question?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, the regulator is independent, and it will be for him to decide whether to set up a working group. I would very much welcome that, because there needs to be more dialogue in and around why our prices are what they are. I recognise the regulator's commitment to undertake further analysis to try to understand why costs are high in Northern Ireland. I understand that he has identified three additional pieces of work that are considered to have a direct impact on the issues. He is looking at the review of the competitiveness of the industrial and commercial (I&C) market; at robust scrutiny of network price proposals; and at work to integrate the wholesale market with western Europe. So, different strands of work are ongoing in the regulator's office, and I welcome that, but Members need to be aware of the different pressures that we have in relation to energy costs and the impact that that has on our business community.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that domestic consumers should not be forced to pay more to reduce energy costs for larger users?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that that will necessarily be the outcome of this piece of work. I want the regulator to look at why our prices are so high at present for large energy users. Is there a subsidy coming across at present from domestic consumers to business consumers? Are they having to pay more in relation to domestic consumers having lower rates here than they do elsewhere? So, I do not think that we should be prescriptive. We should look at all the evidence that the regulator brings forward to ensure that we have a fuller picture of what is happening in the energy scene and particularly in the single electricity market.

2.30 pm

Finance and Personnel

DARD Headquarters: Business Case

1. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail whether he has

received the business case for the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development headquarters to Ballykelly. (AQO 3864/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Neither I nor my officials have received any business case for the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's (DARD) headquarters to Ballykelly.

Mr Copeland: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Will the Minister confirm whether, to his knowledge, any discussions have taken place with DARD staff and their unions about flexible working arrangements so that all staff are not required to work from the new location at Ballykelly?

Mr Wilson: Some work has been done with DARD staff to assess their response to the relocation. Among DARD staff, 86% indicated that they are not content to work in Ballykelly. There are, of course, a range of Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) and corporate HR procedures that can be used when staff are unwilling, or unable on some occasions, to move to a new location. Those procedures will assist staff with locating to other Departments or will help them with the move to the new location.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that, whatever wrangles there may be about the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, the site at Ballykelly must not be allowed to lie for decades growing benweeds? That is one thing that is for certain. Will he undertake to initiate an Executive task force or something of that kind so that we can get the best people together to ensure that that does not happen and that the site does not become another Long Kesh?

Mr Wilson: I do not think that there is any need for the Member to implore me to do that. The First Minister and deputy First Minister are cognisant of the fact that this is an important site in an area where there is a great need for economic regeneration. Whether it is a site to which DARD will relocate or whether some other activity will take place on it, we do not want to leave the site with the grass growing underneath our feet. It is an important economic asset, and it should be developed. It should then be able to return some economic reward to the area and to the Executive. The First Minister and deputy First Minister are already exercised about the site and wish to make sure that it is put to good use.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. In the relocation of a Department, does the Minister support the Bain report's recommendation that public sector jobs should be fairly distributed to towns outside Belfast?

Mr Wilson: First of all, the Bain report is not a report that the Executive have adopted. Considerable costs are involved in the pilot project that the Bain report put forward. In fact, I think that the costs in the Bain report were about £40 million for relocation. At a time when we have such demands on the Budget, I do not think that that will necessarily be a priority.

However, the best opportunities can come when the Executive are taking on new functions. So, when a new function is being taken on or in situations when opportunities arise because of lease changes or whatever, where it makes economic sense, we of course want to see the impact of Executive activity spread across Northern Ireland. In fact, one objective of the Programme for Government is to ensure that economic prosperity and activity are widespread across Northern Ireland so that no one and no area feel excluded.

Mr Allister: As Finance Minister, do you think it acceptable that such a major decision was made by a Department without providing costings, particularly when that is compounded by the fact that the shortlisting was done on the basis not of specific sites but of district council areas and the decision to appraise only the Ballykelly site was made by ministerial direction? Does all that not suggest a railroading that compounds the lack of costings?

Mr Wilson: Ministerial direction is not an unusual mechanism to use for decisions. However, such a ministerial direction has to be accepted by the Executive, and there has to be an Executive decision on it. Of course, a decision simply cannot be made without costings being produced. A business case would have to be produced in which all the costs and implications are exposed and open for scrutiny and question, and, at that stage, value-for-money considerations can be looked at.

Ministerial direction has been made, which is the first stage of the process. I have not accepted that and have referred it to the Executive. The Executive will discuss it, after which the normal business case process will have to be followed.

Departmental Underspends

2. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the Secretary of State's comments on departmental underspends. (AQO 3865/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Secretary of State recently suggested, somewhat scathingly, that Northern Ireland Departments currently underspend, and, somehow or other, she regarded that as an example of economic underperformance. As in so many cases, the Secretary of State displays either a lack of understanding or a lack of briefing about Northern Ireland affairs. I am not sure what she was actually referring to. If she was referring to the fact that we have Budget flexibility arrangements, which were negotiated by the Executive with the Treasury and which allow us to carry money over on our capital and current spend budget every year, we are perfectly entitled to do that. That arrangement was sought so that we could have good, prudent financial management and not a frenzy of unnecessary spend at the end of a financial year.

If the Secretary of State was referring to money that was reallocated to Departments in monitoring rounds, that also makes good economic sense. If projects cannot be carried forward, the money is reallocated to another priority. Indeed, in some cases, we were able to initiate new areas of spending that were beneficial to the Northern Ireland economy.

If she was referring to money that the Department of Justice carries over, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and the negotiating team at the time when policing and justice powers were devolved, negotiated that with the then Government. So, I am not sure what she was referring to. Our record on underspends is much better than that of previous direct rule Ministers when they were in charge.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his response. Whatever the Secretary of State was referring to, and given the Finance Minister's reference at the end of his response, will he give us a brief comparison of the current underspend and the underspend of a predecessor Secretary of State under direct rule?

Mr Wilson: I will make a comparison between last year and the last year of direct rule; I have the figures here somewhere. With current expenditure, we averaged 0.8% underspend in each of the past four years compared with 2%

under direct rule. With capital expenditure, our average underspend was 1.5% compared with 9.6% under direct rule. Do not forget that some of the money that was then underspent and was left in the end-year flexibility as a result of direct rule Ministers' inability to spend money was snatched away from us by the current Government when they decided that end-year flexibility money should just disappear. We lost £360 million because of that decision, so we suffered doubly. We did not spend the money at the time, then it lay in the pot and was snatched from us. Our record has been fairly good, and maybe the Secretary of State ought to think about that before she starts to lecture us.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Does he agree that even greater flexibility in the resource allocation process could enhance forward planning and reduce the incidence of underspend?

Mr Wilson: I would be a bit concerned about looking for greater flexibility there, in so far as it is important that when money is allocated for a particular financial year, it is spent in that year. Money benefits the economy only if it is spent; it does not benefit the economy if we hold on to it.

Although it is always nice to have a pot of money to dip into for a contingency, for the purposes of the delivery of the Programme for Government and services in Northern Ireland, we do not want too much flexibility. Otherwise, I suspect that Ministers would hold on to some money, sometimes for prudent reasons and sometimes because they had projects further down the road for which they wanted to put money aside.

That is one of the reasons why, when we discussed flexibility with the Treasury, we suggested the limits that were set at that stage, which were 0.6% for current budgets and 1.5% for capital budgets. That is probably a comfortable figure to live with. It ensures that we spend money and, if there is an underspend, we do not have to spend it quickly at the end of the year.

Mrs D Kelly: I note that the Minister's answer consisted primarily of excuses at a time of record high levels of youth unemployment and a lack of political decision-making at the Executive. It might be helpful were he to outline whether he posed some of those rhetorical questions to the Secretary of State and, if so, what her answers were.

Mr Wilson: I think that the lady fails to listen to answers. Maybe someone in the SDLP writes a question for her, which she then feels that she has to read out, regardless of what has gone before.

Where were the excuses? There were no excuses. I explained that we deliberately negotiated the Budget exchange scheme that enabled us to carry money over from one year to the next. The reason for it was to give us that flexibility at the end of the year.

All Departments, including that of her Minister, surrender and bid for money in monitoring rounds. Indeed, there are many things that her Minister could not have done had it not been for monitoring rounds.

I know that the SDLP has a love/hate relationship with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, but it makes absolute sense to be able to carry money forward for projects. Additional flexibility for the police budget is what was negotiated.

Those are not excuses; those are explanations of how we sought to have good management of money in the four-year period of the Budget.

Ulster Bank

3. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will ask HM Treasury to intervene in relation to easing the credit restrictions imposed by the Ulster Bank. (AQO 3866/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I wrote to the Chancellor earlier this month about a number of banking-related issues, including the position of the Ulster Bank. *[Laughter.]* I do not know what is so funny about writing to the Chancellor. I would have thought that that was a reasonable thing for the Finance Minister to do. I am sure that the honourable lady has a reason for her nervous laugh. After asking a question like that, I would have a nervous laugh as well.

I am worried about the way in which impairments are affecting the ability of a number of banks in Northern Ireland to lend, particularly the Ulster Bank. As a result of impairments, the banks have to regularly write off losses on some of their property, which means that they are unable to lend to businesses. Not only that, but banks are chasing businesses that, they believe, have some cash. They do so to bring in as much money as possible to repair their balance sheet,

regardless of the damage to the businesses from which they snatch that cash.

We have written to the Chancellor, and I believe that, in particular, he can bring some influence to bear on the Ulster Bank because it is part of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) group, which is wholly Government-owned. I also intend to meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury sometime next month to discuss the issues.

2.45 pm

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he inform the House what Mervyn King had to say about the Ulster Bank situation in their recent discussions?

Mr Wilson: I welcome the discussions that we had with Mervyn King, who was governor of the Bank of England at that stage. Of course, this is not a devolved matter but something for the Government at Westminster. However, he was very blunt and made it clear that, unless there were significant changes in the way in which the banking situation is handled, we could be in for a very long period in which economic activity in Northern Ireland is seriously affected by the inability of the banks to lend and, furthermore, by the actions that the banks would take — taking money away from businesses to repair their balance sheets.

He suggested a number of things. He said that the first thing that the banks need to do is come clean and simply state the scale of the problem. His second suggestion was for us to separate the clean part — I think that that was his term — of the banks' activities from the bad part of the banks' activities. Those are some of the things and mechanisms that I want to discuss with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury when I meet him later.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Further to that, has the Minister received any assurances from Ulster Bank following the recent IT glitches at the bank? Does he believe that it has finally got the problem under control?

Mr Wilson: I am not an IT expert, and I suspect that the people whom I speak to in the Ulster Bank are not IT experts either. They take assurances from the anoraks and geeks with the technical knowledge who deal with such issues. I am sure that Members will recognise those technical terms.

The initial defect last summer caused great disruption. The bank thought that that was the

end of it, but there was then the second glitch, which, thankfully, was not as disruptive. All that I can say is that, in the conversations that I have had with it, Ulster Bank has assured me that it believes that it is now on top of the technical problems.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give his opinion on how successful the provision of funds by Invest Northern Ireland has been in addressing the failure of the banks to lend to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

Mr Wilson: I think that, to date, it has been very successful. Those loans have been well oversubscribed. Invest NI is allocating money on target. Indeed, I suspect that it is likely to come back to me in the June monitoring round looking for more money. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can probably give the Member greater detail on this, but Invest NI recently opened the loan facility to the very smallest of businesses. Therefore, we now have a full range of loans, from very large loans of over £2 million right down to very small loans. Those have been well received and are well oversubscribed.

That will never fully fill the gap or do the job of banks. What we really need is an operating banking system in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the Executive and the Enterprise Minister are right to step in and try to fill whatever part of the gap that they can fill. Do not forget that the beauty of the schemes that have been put in place is that they have also succeeded in drawing down some local money that was never used here before; for example, money from pension schemes, which used to go outside Northern Ireland. Those contributions made by people in Northern Ireland are now being used to benefit local businesses.

Welfare Reform: Rates Support

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how many individuals who receive a reduction in their rates through the lone pensioner allowance, the disabled persons allowance or the housing benefit rate relief scheme will lose some or all of this assistance as a result of welfare reforms. (AQO 3867/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Department recently closed the preliminary consultation on localising the rate rebate scheme. I am considering the responses to that. The process will then inform us on discussions and decisions that we have to make.

It is probably too early to indicate who or what will be affected by changes in the funding arrangements, particularly the 10% cut that has been imposed across the United Kingdom. However, as the consultation document indicated, we will have to make some very hard decisions as we now have to prioritise who we help, given that we will have less money available. Those decisions will probably be put off for a while, because the Executive have decided to put money in, for the next three years at least, to fill the gap left by the 10% cut from the Treasury when the issue was devolved. I have to consider the various options. Once I have considered them, a paper will go to the Executive. That will go out for consultation, and a new scheme will have to be put in place by the end of 2014.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his preliminary response to the question. Does he not accept that for those people identified in the question — lone pensioners, older people, people on disability benefits, and people who are dependent, through housing benefit, on rates relief — there needs to be a new scheme to afford them the opportunity to pass into the new arrangement or they will become further marginalised?

Mr Wilson: First, the consultation that is out at present is to identify who the priority groups should be. If we have less money available, not everybody who is a priority at present can remain a priority. There are a number of options, and I do not want to go into them and their disadvantages now.

As far as the groups that the Member mentioned are concerned, they are important priorities. How we will facilitate them, and whether we can facilitate them all to the extent that we are doing so at present, is what we need to outline in the second consultation document. Of course, he, along with other Assembly Members and everybody else who is interested, will have the opportunity to make a contribution.

I want to make it clear to the Assembly that, since we will finish up with less money available for the scheme, we are going to have to look at the groups we continue to support. If we continue to support all groups, we cannot support all of them to the extent that we are doing so at present. Those are the hard choices that are going to have to be made.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he assure us that

vulnerable groups such as pensioners will be protected from the worst excesses of benefit cuts, taking into account that we have one of the meanest pension schemes in the developed world? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Wilson: I said to the Member in a previous answer that there are groups that should continue to be given support. From the consultation so far, that is clear. We cannot support everyone. Even the interim arrangements we are putting in place to continue the scheme as it exists at present will cost the Executive an additional £47 million in three years. That cost will only escalate as time goes on, as more people qualify and as the level of rates goes up. Even if the level of rates stays constant, inflation means that the cost of that support goes up. So, we have decisions to make.

The groups to which we decide to give less support or take out altogether will be in the consultation document, which I hope to bring to the Executive in May, or at least before the summer. After that, it will go out for consultation. All of the issues that Members have raised will be pertinent to the discussion that arises from that consultation document.

Commercial Rates

5. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the timeline for the review of the commercial rates system. (AQO 3868/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I assume that the question refers to the non-domestic revaluation. Land and Property Services (LPS) is issuing 54,000 letters to businesses across Northern Ireland to seek information from them on the details of their leasing arrangements, levels of rent, etc. All of that will, hopefully, be collated by late summer. I thank the Member for raising the question, because I want to emphasise and make it clear that we need businesses to respond to those questions. That gives us the raw data on which to make decisions about how changes in valuations will be brought about. If we do not have the data, people cannot complain if they feel that the exercise has been incomplete. I welcome the fact that I can say that here today.

It is a complex process, and we will continue to engage with the business community until we have a full understanding of where the market is at present. LPS will complete the valuations by the autumn of 2014, and that will allow councils to do their calculations on rates and

allow us to decide whether or not we need to have some kind of interim rate arrangements. For example, what will we do if there are big increases for some businesses? It will also let the business community know the impact. The new rates will then be billed in April 2015.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the drawing up of the rateable valuations in the past, the criteria have centred around the size and location of properties, the number of rooms, etc. Is the Minister or his officials giving any consideration to including other criteria, such as the type of use that a building is put to and the rate of turnover or level of sales in that business?

Mr Wilson: That suggestion has been made by a former pupil of mine, who also happens to be one of the lobbyists for traders in Belfast city centre. I sometimes wonder if I taught him much economics. I look at the Member for the Green Party; I have quite a few failures amongst my students.

I will give you one answer to the sales tax idea — Starbucks. A sales tax will be to the disadvantage of small businesses and those who cannot afford to engage smart, expensive accountants to enable them to avoid the tax. Since we have to gain a certain amount of money from rates, if the people who can employ the clever accountants avoid the tax, those who cannot — and that tends to be the smaller businesses — will pay the tax. That is one of my answers to the suggestion that, somehow or other, the payments for property should be based on sales. I do not think that it is a good idea, and I do not think that it is workable. If you want to find ways of chasing people from the high street, you introduce a sales tax and simply make goods bought through shops more expensive. Where do people go? The internet.

Mr I McCrea: Can the Minister outline what effect the review of public administration will have on any revaluation transitional relief scheme?

Mr Wilson: It is a bit early to say. When the new rates come in, two factors will influence that. First, if there is a huge difference between the rates that some businesses currently pay and what they will pay after the revaluation, there may well be need for a transitional scheme. In past revaluations, there have been transitional schemes for properties that had an increase of, I think, more than 25%, because you cannot allow a big jump like that when properties are unprepared for it.

Secondly, as a result of the review of public administration (RPA), there may be huge differences in the rates charged in one district council area — we are talking about a district rate now, not the regional rate — and another council area. I have made it clear in answers to the House on a number of occasions that the Executive have set aside money. Indeed, the Environment Minister has been promised the money for that, to allow for some transition there, too.

The exact nature of the transition scheme has not yet been decided.

3.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease while we make a change at the Table.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I ask that you read the record of the Minister's response to my question, in which he erroneously and outrageously suggested that I read a pre-prepared supplementary question. He replied in a sexist manner. Furthermore, the Minister has a record of sexist abuse. I also ask you to note that the Minister failed to answer the question.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I will refer that to the Speaker for review.

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

Private Members' Business

Economic Initiatives and Sustainable Employment

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to target resources towards economic initiatives and sustainable employment to ensure a reduction in the numbers of young people, apprentices, graduates and skilled workers who are emigrating to seek employment opportunities elsewhere. — [Mr Boylan.]

Mr Hamilton: I apologise for missing the earlier part of the debate. Proceedings in the House moved a lot quicker than I had expected, and I was engaged elsewhere in the Building. However, we are so well served by Hansard that I have been able to read all the previous contributions of Members. Having read those, I am quite glad that I missed the early part of the debate, although I am sure I will not raise the standard too much.

I welcome the debate to the extent that it gives the House an opportunity to discuss economic matters that are affecting people. For all the debates in the House on matters of great concern, this is the issue — employment, jobs and the economy — that everybody right across this country, regardless of class, creed or background, is most concerned about.

It is undoubtedly the case that we in Northern Ireland have a growing problem with unemployment. Our figure is at 8·5%, which is the highest we have had for 15 years. However, as bad as it is at 8·5% and growing, it is worth noting that it is far better than in the Republic of Ireland, where the figure is 14%. The EU average is 12%. Those of us who can remember the 1980s can recall a time when unemployment in Northern Ireland was at 15%. I cannot remember that — I am much too young — but I have been told by others that it was 15%. There are people laughing at the back.

There were times when unemployment was very much worse in Northern Ireland than it is now. That is, of course, cold comfort to the 8·5% of people who are looking for work and cannot find it. It particularly acute — this is the emphasis of the motion — for young people. Youth unemployment in Northern Ireland has risen to 21,000, which is 21·3% of people aged between 18 and 23. However, again, it is worth

noting that that figure is better than in the Republic of Ireland, where it is 30%, and the EU, where the average stands at 23%. There are economies that are doing very much worse than ours.

It is also worth pointing out that we should not always equate unemployment exclusively with a loss of jobs. If the Social Development Minister were here, I am sure that he would tell us that a lot of people who have registered for jobseeker's allowance have moved from other benefits, principally employment and support allowance, and incapacity benefit. It is not always people who have been in work and have lost jobs who are increasing unemployment levels in Northern Ireland to 8·5% of the working population.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. To pick up on that point: the Minister for Employment and Learning recently made a statement to the House on economic inactivity in which he revealed that, of all the people who had transferred from incapacity benefit to jobseeker's allowance, only 0·6% had managed to find a job.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Hamilton: I think that highlights some of the problems and concerns that many of us have with the very swift move, in some cases, of people from one to the other. We may see our economic inactivity figures, which have historically been the worst in the United Kingdom, go down, which, on the face of it, looks quite good, but the net effect might be an increase in those seeking unemployment benefits.

However, I think we all understand and appreciate that there are very good reasons why unemployment has been increasing in Northern Ireland. It is not just in Northern Ireland that this has been happening. I pointed out the EU average and what is happening in the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, in other jurisdictions not because I am flippant about the fact that we are not as bad as some other places but because it perhaps shows that, compared with the 1980s and, indeed, other recessions and downturns, our economy is a bit more robust now than it was in the past.

We are in the position that we are in because of the very good reasons of global forces that are beyond the control of national Governments, never mind our own very small, in a global context, regional Government here in Northern

Ireland. Those difficulties are exacerbated by a national Government in our own country, in London, that are hell-bent on pursuing a policy of austerity. It is not helped by the fact that one of our key markets south of the border in the Irish Republic is in the doldrums and the fact that the euro zone is in such turmoil. It is harming our ability to export. The economy Minister has been encouraging people to export more, and a key market in the Irish Republic is suffering, and the euro zone is suffering quite deeply. Some of our key markets are struggling, and that is why I commend the efforts to expand into new markets, particularly those in the Middle East, where they do not know what the word "recession" means.

I think that we have a more robust economy, and, in part, the question that is posed in the motion is answered by the fact that we have our own Assembly and Executive. We are more robust because we have our own Assembly and Executive and our own Ministers who have concern about what is going on in Northern Ireland in a way that direct rule Ministers would not have had in the past. That is why you get the likes of the economy and jobs initiative, with £200 million invested, including a package of around £10 million for youth employment, as well as measures such as the small business rate relief scheme and other initiatives. Invest Northern Ireland, in spite of everything, is hitting all of its targets in creating jobs, getting investment and getting research and development up.

From when I was at school, I can remember most of my classmates leaving after their A levels and going to university in Scotland and England, never to be seen again.

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

Mr Hamilton: Capping student fees at £3,000 a year helps to keep some of our best talent here. Our job now is to create jobs for those people, and I commend the Minister and her Department and Invest Northern Ireland for the work that they are doing to try to overcome some of the worst problems of this downturn.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: In supporting this motion, I think that it is important to recognise that this is an exceptionally difficult juncture in our economic history. Reference has been made to the international dimension of the economic downturn, and, of course, it has an impact. It has a disproportionate impact on the underdevelopment of our economy, so it is a very difficult time for Executive Ministers acting

as part of their individual briefs or acting in co-operation with each other to address this question.

Nevertheless, the motion reflects the commitments in the Programme for Government, and, notwithstanding the international economic conditions, which continue to change and not necessarily in the immediate circumstances for the better, these are issues that we have to take account of but plan for a different future.

Notwithstanding the ongoing discussions on corporation tax and, perhaps in time, other fiscal power that the Executive might take for themselves after negotiations with Treasury officials, we should be paying attention to the comments of the previous Member who spoke on the experience of the generation that he attended school with. From the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, we have a generation of young people who are preparing to come onto the labour market, and, in a very short number of years, they will be joining the workforce. The question is this: have we done as much as we can to ensure that they get the opportunity to develop their skills, talents and abilities to play meaningful roles in a growing economy?

I think that, notwithstanding the limits that I referred to, we could do more. We could address, within our existing powers, the synergies between, for instance, the Planning Service, the responsibilities of the Department for Learning and Employment (DEL) and the responsibilities of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). I think that we have good Ministers who are capable of addressing those issues in the here and now. If we take as a lead-in time the two or three years that today's 15-year-olds will spend preparing to come on to the labour market, we should ask about what we can do in the meantime with a focused approach of co-operation and support across Ministers to deal with the issues.

In the limited time since the re-establishment of the Executive and Assembly, we have come across issues. Some are legacy issues, while some are to do with the arrangements that were made at the time of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the disposition of the portfolios through the various Departments but that may not fit the current realities. Yet, I think that we are a maturing Assembly. We have sustainability in the political institutions. We work our way through some very significant challenges and difficulties, and, at the end of the day, we take a collective approach, which

means that people stay at the table until solutions emerge.

I welcome that there are indications that all the Members present and all parties will support the motion.

One of the things that we can do to enhance delivery and make it a practical reality is streamline our product to attract inward investment, build up our workforce's ability to increase its capacity and skills level to ensure that it is best placed to take up, enhance and support the development of opportunities.

That is a challenge that we cannot pass on to anyone else. It is the responsibility of those whom we support and elect as Ministers. It is also the responsibility of their respective parties, through their commitments to economic expansion and development, to ensure that we have a co-ordinated and comprehensive approach to that question. I do not think that it has always been coherent or cohesive, but we can do something about that. For that reason, I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat.

In my constituency, and within a seven-mile radius of where I live, there are several manufacturing and engineering companies. In my engagements with those companies, one issue that has been flagged up is the need for investment in the replacement of machinery. In many cases, companies are still engaged in what they call "cutting and drilling". They talked about the need to invest in laser machinery that would allow them to create more exports, a higher turnover and, therefore, employment. It is my understanding that the manufacturing and engineering sector in County Tyrone employs at least 5,000 people. We should not take that for granted. Most businesses in County Tyrone are indigenous.

As I have been told, success is not a destination. We have to continually improve quality and processes. I have been informed that the EU cohesion policy provides for possibilities to invest in a wide variety of sectors. In fact, one of the aims of the European regional development fund is to:

"contribute towards the financing of ... productive investment which contributes to creating and safeguarding sustainable jobs, primarily through direct aid to investment primarily in small and medium-sized enterprises"

Perhaps that could be explored.

Where sustainable employment is concerned, we need government programmes that are aimed at those who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) to deliver genuine potential for full-time employment. I welcome measures to tackle the situation that many young people face, and there is a need for proper training and hope for full-time employment. We need a comprehensive system that offers genuine skills training with accreditation.

I am concerned that many young people in the Dungannon area are falling under the NEET designation and will become economically inactive for long periods of time. Many of the courses that are on offer become a conveyor belt where people are put into work placements to carry out menial tasks over a 12-week period only to return to the NEET designation. Although those placements offer work experience, many people see them as a way of manipulating jobless figures as opposed to being a genuine attempt at training. I call on the Minister for Employment and Learning to look at long-term courses, such as apprenticeships, or at courses that are based in education to allow participants to gain qualifications that they can use to gain meaningful employment.

I am alarmed to see that my own constituency in County Tyrone has some of the highest rates of youth emigration. We need to do more to stop young people from being forced to leave. It is obvious that many young people are moving away to find work, which is a loss to the entire community. Many of them are well educated and skilled, and their loss will have an impact on the future of the area to operate competitively to attract inward investment. Not only does that impact economically but it impacts socially, as many sporting organisations find that their teams are decimated as young people move away. I know of areas where GAA clubs cannot field a full side, and I expect that that is the same in soccer, rugby and other games.

3.15 pm

The British Tory Government must allow the Assembly to devolve economic powers to the North if we are to begin to address the economic woes that are driving our young people and our future away. I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the fact that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is in attendance for this afternoon's debate, even

though the motion calls on the full Executive. I fully accept the Minister's earlier response when she said that responsibility lies with a number of Ministers.

I want to speak on the motion because I have a son who has had to emigrate to Australia for work in the construction industry. Therefore, from personal experience, I know of the difficulties that are faced by young people and their parents. That is not to say that wider horizons do not help to grow an individual. I hope that my son will return home and that there will be employment at some time in the future, as do many mothers and fathers hope for their children.

Members' contributions noted the general high level of youth unemployment not only in Northern Ireland but throughout Europe and further afield. Nonetheless, the motion:

"calls on the Executive to target resources towards economic initiatives and sustainable employment"

to help ebb the flow of our young people. The Executive should be doing much more than that. There ought to be greater urgency around the Executive table on making decisions that will create jobs. It should be a priority that exercises ministerial minds daily.

The social investment fund, for example, was much heralded as a way to target resources at areas of disadvantage and to promote cohesion across our communities. However, as I understand it, none of that money has yet been spent. Therefore, I hope that the ETI Minister will ensure that her voice is heard at the Executive table so that some of that money might be spent on good, sustainable projects.

A number of policy initiatives in Northern Ireland ought to be revised in light of best practice elsewhere. I am indebted to the Assembly's Research and Information Service staff for their work in preparing background papers for this afternoon's debate. In particular, I note the First Start scheme, which is similar to schemes in Sweden and Finland, where there is a shorter period of unemployment — three months in some areas and no unemployment — so that earlier intervention can take place and help young people to find jobs.

There is also a recommendation in the Nevin Economic Research Institute's report that people who have to participate in work experience schemes should have greater flexibility to allow them to seek jobs at the same time as engaging fully with the work experience

placement. Therefore, I ask the Minister for her view on any revision of some of those schemes and whether those initiatives ought to be promoted around the Executive table.

Some Members noted how adverse health implications resulting from unemployment can affect young people and their families and last longer than the period of unemployment. My party colleague Pat Ramsey touched on the high rates of suicide, particularly among young males, which has a correlation to long-term youth unemployment. So there is an imperative for the Executive to get their act together on some of those policy revisions and resources that are at their disposal to —

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member says that the Executive need to get their act together. The Member needs to realise that her party has a Minister in the Executive, too. Is she putting any internal pressure on him to finally resolve the situation with PPS 21, which means that non-farming rural dwellers cannot build a house in the countryside? If relaxed, it would allow many homes to be constructed, and it would give people in the construction sector a much-needed opportunity for employment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions should be brief. The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome Mr Flanagan's intervention, not least because I recall, as a Craigavon councillor, the current Education Minister saying at one time that no houses should be built in rural areas because they were already oversubscribed. Perhaps a debate needs to be had within Sinn Féin.

I note with interest that the SDLP was at the forefront of condemning PPS 14 and consigning it to the history books. On a personal note, as a rural dweller, PPS 21 causes me some concern in relation to non-farming dwellers. I have made representation to the Minister about that and about rural businesses and their siting. So I assure Mr Flanagan that I am well up to speed on the needs of the people whom I represent. I would also be interested to know whether Mr Flanagan is using his influence —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — to get his Ministers to get their act together on the social investment fund and whether he believes that social housing should be a priority in creating jobs.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): This is a very important debate, and I am a little disappointed to see empty Benches all around the Chamber. People always tell me that they are very concerned about the youth unemployment figures, but that does not appear to be the case here this afternoon. However, I welcome the fact that Members who are in the Chamber contributed to the debate.

Mr Hamilton: I better not go.

Mrs Foster: No, you better not leave, Mr Hamilton. It was a good debate, and there are a lot of issues that I want to address. The previous Member who spoke said that this was an Executive-wide issue. A number of contributions referred not to my ministerial responsibility but to that of others. I will, of course, point my ministerial colleagues in the direction of this debate so that they can read what has been said in connection with their Department.

From our perspective in Northern Ireland, we are a small open economy. We and our key trading partners have had a sluggish recovery, which continues to impact on many of our local businesses and act as a major drag for the local economy. That, in turn, has had an impact on the rate of job creation.

The Executive recognised the economy as our biggest challenge by putting it as our number one priority and publishing the economic strategy at the same time as the Programme for Government. In the economic strategy, we highlighted the fact that the key element was competitiveness and that the way to deal with that whole issue was to focus on export-driven recovery. We put that at the centre of our ambitions, and we recognise that, to do that, we need to rebalance and rebuild the Northern Ireland economy.

The rebalancing piece is looking to the medium to longer term. We want a sustainable economy that will grow our private sector. I found it interesting to read the PwC report recently. It talked about the lack of growth in the Northern Ireland economy and pointed to the huge disparity between the public and private sectors that was acting as a drag on such growth.

Another one of our key priorities is to rebuild and take immediate action on the local labour market. As Members will know, the Executive are committed to achieving £1 billion of investment in our economy. That is pending judicial reviews, of course, which seem

determined to knock any priority that we have off the agenda.

That has been hugely disappointing for the construction industry. The lady opposite mentioned the fact that her son had to leave because he did not have a job in the construction industry.

It is hugely frustrating. Think about those firms that were looking forward to building the A5. Think about the amount of time and effort that they put into planning for the A5 and about those young people who were looking forward to getting out and doing the job that they had been trained to do. It is hugely frustrating for them.

I do take some comfort. I was with the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) on Friday evening. We had a good conversation about the state of the industry. The Federation of Master Builders (FMB) had a report out just yesterday saying that there are some tentative signs of stabilisation in the Northern Ireland construction industry. I welcome that, because we know the pain that has been inflicted on a lot of our young people in the construction sector, particularly in rural areas.

That was one reason that we introduced the £200 million economy and jobs initiative, which looked specifically at trying to help people to reskill themselves and rebuild their lives after a difficult period. It focused on people who had difficulties in the labour market, businesses facing challenges in key markets, and infrastructure investment. As I said, that is all subject to court actions, judicial reviews and all those sorts of things that seem to hamper our desire to get on and build our infrastructure.

We have made considerable progress in implementing the economic strategy and the economy and jobs initiative measures. From my ministerial colleague in DEL, I understand that 333 young people have commenced DEL's First Start programme, 152 participants have commenced the Step Ahead 50+ programme and 40 placements have been undertaken for young people as part of DEL's Steps to Work programme.

In addition, 29 projects have been offered additional funding under the Northern Ireland European social fund programme to provide training and employment initiatives, which will benefit an estimated 11,000 or more participants, including 1,400 NEETs. I believe that it was Ms McGahan who referred to the issue of NEETs.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does the Minister share my concern that young people labelled as NEET now have to fight with graduates, and often tradesmen and tradeswomen, for the jobs that would have been easier for them to access in the past? It is critical that help be given to entry-level graduates or that there be more employment opportunities.

Mrs Foster: I agree that there is a more crowded space for those who are unskilled. I know that my ministerial colleague very much wants to see them upskilling and having some skill to give them a chance in the job market. I certainly support him in that.

As well as that, Invest NI has a programme to help those who are NEET — I do not like the term NEETs, but I think we are all accepting of it in the House — to start their own business, and we provide some funding for that. That is important, to encourage aspiration, innovation and entrepreneurship across Northern Ireland.

We are, in Invest NI and the Department, focused on supporting growth projects that will lead to higher-value-added jobs. That has been the position for some time. However, we created the jobs fund to try to deliver more quickly on the ground jobs for people right across the spectrum.

Over the past two years, 2,600 people are now in work as a result of the scheme. Those are actual jobs created. The largest single project announced was the 336-job announcement by Capita Life and Pensions in Belfast. Others, though, are 164 jobs at Vion Foods, Cookstown; 116 jobs at BT in Belfast; and 79 new jobs at Decora Blind Systems, Lisburn. Jobs are being created, but we need more and we need to do things better, and I think that we all accept that.

The role for the economic subcommittee of the Executive is a real one, and I very much think that it is a subject that we will come back to. We are always looking for ways in which we can assist. The next meeting of the subcommittee should very much look at this area. The DEL Minister will obviously have a significant impact on what we discuss there.

3.30 pm

My Department, through Invest Northern Ireland and a number of others, works very closely with second- and third-level education providers. Some Members commented that people were working in silos and needed to work better

together. In my period in this office, we have never had a better working relationship with DEL. It works very well. We are supporting each other in different schemes, such as the Assured Skills scheme and the IT graduate scheme, which we work on together. We work together very well. That is always difficult for a coalition Government; I accept that, but our officials are working very well together.

The question is this: could we do more across government? Yes, we probably could do more across government. I think that that is a subject that we can address in the next economic subcommittee. You might think that a lot of ministerial decisions do not have an automatic economic impact, but most decisions that we take in our ministerial portfolios have an economic impact, and people need to accept that.

I want to talk briefly about social enterprises. We talked a little bit about them in Question Time today, but I want to recognise the unique contribution that the social economy plays in Northern Ireland. The big society, as it is called by the Prime Minister, has been going in Northern Ireland for a considerable time. Through our social entrepreneurship programme, we are seeking to encourage social enterprises in regions where, traditionally, there have been few, to build skills and capability and to try to make an impact at a very localised level. I am hopeful that that will take place, because there are some very good examples of how it can make a difference.

I am not going to go through all of the DEL schemes, but I think Mr Lyttle mentioned the youth employment scheme. It seems to be working well across the Province. It gives people the ability to have work experience and then to use it to try to get a job. DEL's flagship apprenticeship programme, Apprenticeships NI, enables those learners who have attained the minimum school-leaving age and are in paid employment to gain an industry-recognised apprenticeship qualification. That is not just for the sake of having a qualification. Hopefully, it will act as a way in which they will be able to attain long-term employment.

There are, of course, also the graduates. Although we accept that there is youth unemployment, and we tend to look at the NEETs, and what have you, we realise that quite a few graduates are struggling to find employment. The graduate acceleration programme, which comes from DEL, is available to all graduates who have a full degree and who have been out of work for 13 weeks or more. It is also available to graduates

who are in employment of fewer than 16 hours a week.

As I said, there is a lot of flexibility between ourselves and DEL. I welcome that. I welcome the close relationship, but we need to encourage young people to look at qualifications in those areas where there are job opportunities. To me, those very much seem to be in the science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) areas. In November, DEL secured funding for an additional 500 undergraduate STEM places. Of course, students enrolled on STEM courses have a higher chance. I have visited a number of IT firms recently. Just last week, I announced 76 new IT jobs at Latens Systems in south Belfast. So, we are pleased to see that that sector is very strong, but we need to provide the skills to ensure that it stays strong.

I was hugely disappointed with the decision of the Prime Minister to defer the decision on devolving corporation tax. It remains a key element of what we are seeking to achieve for Northern Ireland, but, until a decision is made, we will continue to focus our efforts on a wide range of measures to rebuild and rebalance. The Secretary of State has signalled that our national Government is willing to negotiate on a package of measures in the interim. I very much welcome that. We will look at it as proactively and innovatively as we possibly can to try to see what we can do in the interim.

In closing, I agree that we need to exploit every opportunity to help businesses to survive, prosper and grow, and to ensure that there are opportunities for our young people, apprentices, graduates, and skilled and unskilled workers who live here in Northern Ireland.

Today, there has been a lot of talk about emigration. I recognise that forced emigration is a very nasty element to all that we are discussing here today, but I want to end on this positive note. Just last week, I was with a firm called Axiom, and I went around talking to the young people who were employed there. Most of them had worked in London or, indeed, further afield at some time in their early careers.

I very much welcome the fact that young people go away to look at new horizons and, perhaps, get some experience. However, we must have available jobs for them to come back to when they have had that experience. The fact that we have attracted global firms into Northern Ireland gives them that opportunity. I only wish that I had had the opportunity when I was a young graduate to go away and come back to a firm such as Allen and Overy, Axiom Law or

Herbert Smith Freehills — global law firms that are now situated in Belfast. I very much welcome that.

I look forward to the rest of the debate. I thank Members for taking the time to contribute.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom an rún atá faoi chaibidil againn inniu a mholadh.

I would like to formally wind up the debate, which was proposed and moved formally by my colleague Cathal Boylan. Like the Minister before me, I thank the contributors to the debate. I also thank the Minister for her attendance throughout.

The Minister ended her contribution by talking about forced emigration and emigration. There is a great difference between emigration for adventure's sake or for career or life opportunities and what is happening to many of our people at this time: forced emigration of young people and people who are not so young, including whole family units. That is why the motion urges the Executive to target resources towards those areas where emigration is currently taking keenest effect.

I believe that the wider Executive and individual Departments do not fully appreciate the social impact, in particular, that forced emigration is having on our communities — some more than others. The word "emigration" needs to be stated here, and time and time again. The fact is that emigration levels in some communities are at their highest since the great hunger. There is a new exodus.

I could be very specific, like some MLAs are when they represent their constituencies. I put this in the public domain very recently. Dromore and Trillick are a small town and village that are five miles apart in west Tyrone. There are currently 160 young people in Australia from Dromore and Trillick alone. The reason that I know that for sure is that I met a group of young people and asked them to write out a list of their friends who are currently in Australia. The list quickly reached the figure of 160. To highlight the point in the local community, the young people concerned drew a map of Australia on the ground in Dromore and arranged 160 pairs of shoes inside that map. That highlights the fact that we are talking about real people here, not just statistics. We know their names, their destinations and the reasons why they have emigrated.

I would argue that in most cases, those young people have been forced to emigrate. They did

not emigrate by choice. That is having a big social impact. Recently, I have said publicly that I have met many grandparents in my constituency office in Omagh who are distraught because, one minute, they are leaving their grandchildren to school and, the next week or fortnight, they are only able to keep in touch with them by Skype, because of forced emigration.

I am highlighting the forced emigration aspect of the debate because I would like the Executive to have a specific focus on stemming the tide of emigration in the areas that are worst affected. That means specific job creation and job retention plans for the specific communities that are worst hit. From the answers that I get to tabled questions, I do not get the impression that there is a real appreciation of the social and, indeed, economic impact of emigration at this time.

Cathal Boylan said that emigration is perhaps welcome in some cases because it masks the unemployment figures. Simon Hamilton made a relative positive out of the unemployment figures here, but I think that the scale and proliferation of young people, in particular, who are emigrating or who have emigrated strongly mask and disguise the real figures.

Minister Foster mentioned the fact that there were good working relations between DETI and DEL, which is a good thing. I want to thank DEL because, in the recent past, it supported me as a local MLA in holding a jobs and information evening in the targeted area of Dromore. It provided careers advisers and employment service people to advise people on the various schemes to help them into work. We were reasonably successful in attracting up to a dozen local employers that are recruiting at this time, and that put out a positive message to the families affected.

I think that this is a hugely important issue. I have some sympathy with Minister Foster's point about the lack of interest in this debate given the relatively small numbers in the Chamber at various points, although I emphasise that that does not extend to my party. The media often accuse us of not focusing on the real issues. This is a real issue, and I obviously want the media to report on elected representatives identifying and debating the real issues.

The A5 has been mentioned in the debate as well. That is an economic imperative for the area and community west of the Bann that has been worst hit by emigration. The Institution of Civil Engineers recently said that every £1

invested in infrastructure yields £2.84 in local economic activity. If you multiply that by £330 million, you have your £1 billion investment. It also said that for every £1 million invested in infrastructure, 28.5 jobs are created. So, the figures are clear: the A5 project would be a major shot in the arm, not least for the construction industry. That is why it must not be lost and why we must all redouble our efforts to ensure that it happens.

Finally, I want to commend my party colleague Martina Anderson MEP, because she is organising a conference in County Cavan on Friday 7 June called Guarantee Our Future: Addressing the Issue of Youth Unemployment. Martina has invited speakers from the European Commission, the European Parliament and representatives from youth organisations throughout Ireland and, indeed, Sweden. I encourage anyone interested to engage in that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Executive to target resources towards economic initiatives and sustainable employment to ensure a reduction in the numbers of young people, apprentices, graduates and skilled workers who are emigrating to seek employment opportunities elsewhere.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Antrim Area Hospital: Sexual Assault Referral Centre

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Ms Brown: I am pleased to have secured this debate. I welcome the opportunity to bring the issue of the opening of the sexual assault referral centre before the Assembly today.

Let me be clear from the outset: I welcome the overall approach taken by the Health Minister, the Justice Minister and the PSNI in establishing that centre for victims of sexual violence. I think that it is an example of joined-up government, and other projects could and should learn from it. My intention is not to be critical of any Minister or organisation. I want to work with them. However, I have some concerns, and I want to examine whether there is more that we could do at this stage to ensure that the centre truly meets the needs of all those who will use it.

3.45 pm

I hope to use the debate to continue to raise awareness of the daily abuse that is experienced right across Northern Ireland and to highlight the need for the greater promotion of sexual and domestic violence issues. By way of background, domestic violence policy currently sits with two Departments: the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Justice. A joint action plan was published in April 2012 by the two Departments that outlined their commitment to tackling domestic violence and abuse. The action plan outlined how exactly they would set out to make a real change.

The most important part of that strategy centres on the development of the sexual assault referral centre (SARC). Known as the Rowan, the new SARC is located at Antrim Area Hospital and will be the first facility of its kind in Northern Ireland. It is due to open in just a few weeks' time in May 2013. The centre has the potential, if fully realised, to offer victims of

abuse a first-class service by dealing with their specific needs in a professional, sensitive and reassuring manner. We have a great opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of those affected by abuse.

We need to accept that domestic violence is prevalent in our society and that sexual violence is increasing. Through acceptance of the problem, we can deliver a healing process and can reassure victims that, when they get the courage to seek help, they will get the best service that we can possibly offer. Therefore, it follows that, if we are taking steps to reassure victims that the right thing to do is to come forward for help, there is an onus on us to ensure that they will not be let down by any aspect of the help that we offer.

I have some concerns about what exactly is being provided at the Rowan and whether it will fully meet the needs of victims. My first concern is about the opening hours of the centre. It is proposed that the core business hours of the centre will be from Monday to Friday from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm. That strikes me as a very administrative approach that is more akin to the opening hours of a health centre. Perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence do not carry out their attacks to ensure that they fit in with office opening hours.

When developing a policy, we sometimes have the tendency to not be too radical, and we work round existing templates and look at the low-cost options just to get something up and running. However, not being radical about domestic and sexual violence puts lives at risk. We must do more. The Archway SARC in Glasgow is staffed and open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, with doctors always on call. That offers the victim a premium service, which is what they deserve in the immediate aftermath of an incident.

I am slightly reassured by the Minister's correspondence to the Committee, in which he stated that there will be an on-call response service in the evenings and at weekends and that opening hours have scope for change. However, I have to really press him on that. On what basis were those opening hours suggested? Will he set out his Department's findings on what statistics were considered to conclude that those hours are the most likely times in which the service will be used?

It may well be that the Department is right and that the office-hours approach works best. However, my suspicion is that many victims face their worst attacks at night or at weekends. By the time Monday comes, the trauma has

eased and what passes for normality returns, until, of course, the next attack occurs and the cycle continues. I would be much more reassured if the view was that we will open the centre 24/7, with medical support on hand, and then subsequently refine the opening hours if it proves to be that the statistics support a nine-to-five approach.

I am not immediately reassured by the notion that, at some point in the future, services will be extended to meet need. I do not see that approach in many areas of public policy. Rather, it is about costs, savings and managing on less. However, given that we are where we are, I would appreciate it if the Minister and his officials could give clarification on the trends that they will look for. Will the service have to be stretched to breaking point for many months before they step in and increase the core business hours? Will there be client thresholds and time frames to be met before the service runs core business hours at the weekend?

If we look at the most recent figures from the PSNI and Women's Aid, we can begin to appreciate and get an idea of the type of demand that will be placed on the Rowan. For example, Women's Aid handled over 43,000 calls in 2011-12, while the PSNI responded to an incident that was motivated by domestic violence every 21 minutes. That means that there were 25,196 reported incidents last year. Of course, not all those cases involved sexual violence, and, because of the under-reporting of cases, it is difficult to compare numbers. However, we know that the number of rapes reached its highest level in the past 10 years in 2010-11, with 550 offences recorded. So, even with that very unscientific look at the figures, we can see that a great number of people could come forward for help. We have a real opportunity here to offer a life-changing facility for victims and families alike. That is why I am so focused on getting it right.

I was encouraged to learn that the support on offer will be very much victim-led, but I have further concerns about how exactly that will play out. When victims attend the Rowan during core business hours, staff will help to support them to make a self-referral for counselling to the agency of their choice. I understand that that may be guided by geography, through previous experience with an agency or by specific care needs. So, if a victim from Fermanagh, for example, were to travel to Antrim, it would, of course, be reasonable for them to choose a service closer to home. We have to keep in mind what victims are going through. It is an extremely traumatic time in their life. They may not be able to fully process

the information being discussed or provided. On that basis, I would appreciate it if we could get some sort of clarification on whether there will be a time limit for the victim to consider their options and to make a reasoned and balanced decision on whether to seek prosecution.

More important in any SARC is the role of independent sexual violence advisers (ISVAs) or independent domestic violence advisers. I have not seen a reference to such advisers in the Rowan, and I feel that their provision and the subsequent funding for the relevant supporting organisations that would be affected is an absolute necessity. Along with doctors and nurses, ISVAs should be on hand so that practical and emotional support can be offered in person to victims, enabling them to make informed choices about what help or counselling they might receive to deal with the aftermath of an attack. I therefore ask the Minister to confirm whether independent sexual violence advisers or independent domestic violence advisers will be part of the SARC set-up. If not, why not?

That leads me to accommodation. I appreciate that we are not trying to operate a hostel at the Rowan, but we must be able to ensure that, for a short period in the midst of great trauma, there is space and time for victims and, if need be, their children to feel safe and secure. That will also help the PSNI investigation, if there is one; I will turn to that in a moment. The provision of emergency accommodation would be invaluable at this stage for a victim, even more so when children are involved, particularly if the father is the perpetrator. If we cannot provide alternative accommodation in the immediate aftermath of abuse, I fear that we will place victims right back in the heart of the environment that they are trying to escape. We need to develop a cohesive strategy that has the victim at its core, not a merry-go-round referral system that leaves the victim feeling discarded and alone.

We need to understand and appreciate that the majority of cases of domestic and sexual violence, if not all, result in serious mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide. Additional health problems include physical injuries, gynaecological disorders, adverse pregnancy outcomes and sexually transmitted infections. Again, I stress that thorough care needs to be provided to ensure the individual's long-term well-being.

I mentioned PSNI investigations a moment ago. Recently, I wrote to the Chief Constable about forensic evidence, as I believe that we need

more information on the process. I asked him where the forensic evidence will be stored, for how long and whether there is an optimal time limit for capturing evidence. These requirements should be factored in to any timetables for victims using the services at the Rowan. The immediate aftermath of an attack will be the most confusing time for the victim. It would not be unreasonable for the victim to take time to consider their decision on whether to prosecute. Ultimately, they should feel empowered through the process.

In closing, I pay tribute to the brave women, men and children who find the courage and strength to seek help and to organisations such as Women's Aid that provide them with refuge. They should know that they are not alone in their battle; we are here to help. The Rowan should become a beacon of hope for those suffering abuse, and I hope that many a new start will emerge after their first contact with the service. However, we must get every detail right to ensure that that is a reality. I commend the Health Minister and the Justice Minister, their officials and those involved in the PSNI for all they do to help victims of domestic and sexual abuse. I hope that, through the debate, we can recognise this as a most critical area of work that deserves our utmost effort in moving forward.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to take part in the debate on behalf of the Health Committee. Although it is an Adjournment debate, I felt it important to say a few words as Chair of the Committee and to update Members on what the Committee has done thus far. I commend Pam, who is a member of the Health Committee, for securing the Adjournment debate on this important issue.

The Committee held a briefing with departmental officials on 27 February to learn more about the sexual assault referral centre — to be known from here on in, as Pam said, as the Rowan — which is to be opened next month. The Committee is pleased that this joint initiative between the Health and Justice Departments is finally going to become a reality and will offer people in our communities who have been the victim of sexual assault the specialist care and support that they need. I am delighted that the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health are here, in whatever capacity, to listen to Members' concerns and issues.

People are sometimes mistakenly of the view that sexual violence does not really happen in our society or does not happen to very many people. In fact, the statistics show that 23% of women and 3% of men experience sexual assault as an adult. Last year, over 1,700 sexual offences were recorded by the PSNI. It is a very real issue that needs to be tackled head-on. There should be no taboo about people reporting sexual assaults. When people seek help, they should be treated with dignity and by experts who can best advise them of what options are available to them. The Rowan will serve that purpose. It will be staffed by people who can provide the appropriate medical care, including sexual health services. People will be signposted to the relevant organisation that can provide counselling and ongoing support.

The Committee very much welcomes the fact that these services will be available in the Rowan, providing a clear pathway for victims and survivors of sexual assault to access health and criminal justice services. However, as Pam said, the Committee has a concern about the opening hours, which, at the moment, are planned to be Monday to Friday, 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, with an on-call service during weekends and evenings. I suspect that that is not when people are most likely to require services, and I hope that the Ministers — the Minister who will respond and the Minister of Justice, who is here as a constituency MLA — will keep a close eye on this. The reality is that those who carry out such heinous crimes do not do so on a Monday to Friday between nine and five, and we need to be aware of that.

There is also the issue of access to counselling. The Rowan will not provide ongoing counselling for people but will refer them to other organisations. The Committee has written to one of the main counselling providers — Nexus — and it has confirmed that its waiting lists are long, up to four months in some areas. So, there is concern that extra resources do not seem to have been allocated to counselling services, despite the fact that the opening of the Rowan could result in more people seeking counselling.

The Committee for Health will visit the Rowan shortly after it opens on 8 May, and we will be joined by members of the Justice Committee. It is important that Committee members, on behalf of the Assembly, show their support for the centre. We will welcome the opportunity on that visit to tour the new facility and speak to staff.

The Committee is of the view that sexual violence and sexual assault need to be given a higher priority. The opening of the Rowan sends out a clear message that this is the case. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will brief the Committee in June on proposals for the new sexual violence strategy. Like other Committee members, I look forward to hearing from the Department on that.

I appeal to the Health Minister, who will respond to the debate, and to the Justice Minister at a later date to take on board the genuine concerns of Committee members. Although this is a state-of-the-art, top-class facility, there are genuine concerns about people being able to access it and access counselling after reporting a rape or sexual assault.

4.00 pm

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank Pam for securing today's debate.

My particular concern is also about the opening hours. Many of the cases of sexual abuse and harassment that come across my office threshold deal with violence in a marriage or partnership. Very often, these are in very controlling circumstances. It requires enormous courage for a victim to leave the home, where there is a very controlling and dominating environment, to report the circumstances of an incident. That is all the more difficult if there are children in the family home whose interests are to be protected. How to make the service more accessible to people at the moment when it is required is a challenge that should be examined.

I applaud the initiative, but the experience should be very carefully studied. Any experience that organisations such as Nexus can contribute would demonstrate the need for what I would describe in these circumstances as a rapid response. There has to be an opportunity for sanctuary, if necessary, and certainly an opportunity for support and treatment. We have to recognise that it is exceptionally difficult for people to break out of the oppressive relationships that can sometimes exist and that often characterise incidents of sexual abuse. I ask the Minister to consider whether the response is as comprehensive as it needs to be and whether we could adopt a flexible approach, with the intention of adding value to what is already on offer.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, thank Pam for bringing this subject to the Assembly. It is phenomenally important. Many years ago, when I was working for Short Bros, someone told me about all that was going wrong among families in Glasgow and said that it was as bad, if not worse, here in Northern Ireland. Having heard the statistics earlier, we realise how bad it is and how important such a centre is to Northern Ireland. Therefore, I very much welcome the joint working of various Departments and the fact that the Committee is represented here today.

I am keen to know how well the centre will work with all the excellent organisations here in Northern Ireland — Women's Aid, Nexus, the Rape Crisis Centre or any of the many others — to make sure that everyone works together and no one makes it more difficult for anyone else.

It is very good to have this centre at our hospital in Antrim. I would like to congratulate the previous Minister on getting this started during his time. I was there when the foundation stone was laid in February 2011.

Looking at those involved and the key elements, I see no mention of an alcohol or drugs specialism. I wonder whether those will be included. Maybe that is what Pam was touching on when she was looking at specialisms. There are many sides to this that all work together.

I also share the concerns about the Rowan centre being open only during the week. What we see at the moment in Antrim Area Hospital is everything happening at the same time, over the weekends and at night. There are too many ambulances and too many people there at the moment, and there are recent reports that those from other departments often have to help in the hospital. I congratulate all of them on doing that when short-staffed, as they often are at the moment. I wonder how we are doing with the Rowan centre. Have we got everyone recruited? Is it on target? How will it function beside everything else that goes on in that hospital? It is fantastic to have it in south Antrim, and I congratulate all involved. I look forward to hearing about its success.

Mr Ford: I also congratulate Pam Brown on securing the debate. The very fact that we have managed to have the presence of the Chair of the Health Committee shows that, unusually for an Adjournment debate, this is not just a constituency issue, although it clearly is a significant constituency issue for those of us who represent South Antrim. For the sake of

Hansard, I should record that I am speaking as a constituency MLA, as Sue Ramsey referred to earlier, although I suspect that some of what I say may be slightly influenced by the other job that I do.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member speak closer to a microphone so that everyone can hear him more clearly and his contribution can be recorded accurately?

Mr Ford: Sorry, I thought that Members would not want to hear any more.

We need to recognise that in the Rowan centre we have a first-rate centre being provided for Northern Ireland. It is something that I was very pleased to be able to see, as Danny Kinahan has just said, with the previous Health Minister when work started on it during the previous Assembly mandate. It is unfortunate that it has taken so long to get the centre built, and there is still work to be done to get it right, but we should recognise the fact that we will now have a specialist facility that will do the important job of providing the care services, alongside the justice services, that the victims of domestic and sexual violence require. That is a key way of ensuring that people are able to give best evidence and cases will stand up in court. At the same time as ensuring that people's needs are met in the aftermath of those troubles, it will ensure that the perpetrators are made amenable for what they have carried out.

There are clearly issues, which other Members have highlighted, where work remains to be done to see that we get things absolutely right. I am not sure that we need to be too concerned at this stage about the opening hours, because there will be staff on call out of hours. The important thing is to see that we get the centre started in a way in which it can continue to make progress and that, in particular, the responsible agencies learn the lessons, see how things work in the early days and are prepared to adjust the way in which the centre works to meet the needs of the clients who will come to them. The opening hours have been mentioned by everybody so far, I think, but it will not be a purely nine-to-five facility. There will be opportunities for specialist staff to be brought in as and when needed.

Of course, it will not be the only place in Northern Ireland providing services. Services will still be provided by health facilities and the police across Northern Ireland. The important thing is that we develop a centre of expertise; that we are able to meet the needs of those with the most complex needs; and that we bring the services together in a way that is only going

to be possible from now on. We should be extremely proud of the progress that is being made. The fact that both the Health Committee and the Justice Committee are taking a close interest shows the value that will be achieved for all our people in seeing that the centre makes progress.

It is extremely valuable that, by concentrating the expertise, we are able to provide better services. We often hear demands that services be provided everywhere, but the reality is that those who need the services at the Rowan will be much better off if they have to travel for half an hour or an hour to be there and get all the services in one place than would be the case if we attempted to provide services everywhere. Services cannot be provided on a top-quality basis everywhere.

There are questions that will need to be asked. We will need to look at the practice as the centre opens and starts its operation and people see how it works. However, I believe from what I have seen — if I may temporarily put on a ministerial hat — that things are being got broadly right. If we learn the lessons, we will ensure that they continue to be made better. I look forward to hearing from the Minister who has primary responsibility at the end of the debate about how that will be done.

Mr Clarke: I am pleased to follow Mr Ford in his capacity as a Back-Bencher. It is positive that we now have something. We have had nothing such as this in Antrim to tackle domestic violence or sexual abuse, so the positive from the debate is that we now have a centre.

There may be criticism about its opening times and whether it should be open 24 hours a day. However, it is interesting, given that it is not a 24-hour centre, that the Minister has already given an assurance that there will be a 24-hour response. That is an important feature from the outset. The centre will operate from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, and people will be referred there in the first instance by the police. It will be open more fully in September. I read some interesting comments by the Minister that from day one there will be a 24-hour on-call response in practice. That should be heartening for the individuals who will need the service.

In concentrating on those who need the service, it is a sad reflection that we have to provide such a facility in our Province. That is obviously because of the problems associated with some of the families who suffer domestic and sexual violence.

I will take a cheap shot at the Minister of Justice while he is here. I know that he is here as an individual Back-Bencher, but I will be quite happy if he wants to come forward. There is an opportunity here. We know from talking to people who have suffered domestic or sexual violence that it is sometimes difficult for them to come forward and sometimes the justice weighed out does not necessarily fit the crime. The Minister is here today and he is listening, and I say to him that some of those aspects need to be reviewed, particularly the sentencing of people for those crimes.

I know that you are going to pull me back to the subject of the Rowan centre —

Mr Ford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Clarke: I will indeed.

Mr Ford: Were the Member to acknowledge some of the work that has been done by the Department of Justice on better services for victims and witnesses, he might acknowledge that some progress has been made. If he is asking a Minister to deal with sentencing issues, which are a matter for the independent judiciary, we are on slightly dangerous ground in this Chamber.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I draw all Members back to the subject of the debate. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is here to respond shortly.

Mr Clarke: Thank you for your guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. I take on board what the Minister of Justice has just said.

The Rowan centre is on a brownfield site that has been developed. From what I have read in some reports, it is state-of-the-art. The PSNI statistics show that 1,892 people reported in the past 12 months, which is 1,892 people too many. We are also aware of under-reporting. The Rowan centre can work with the individuals who are referred to it, but we also cannot forget about the cases that go unreported.

Confidence has to be built into the system so that people can report their aggressors. That will enable us to tackle the root problem as opposed to having to care for people after they have been sexually abused. That is the sad reflection. As I said, it is sad that we have had to provide this facility in this area because of what is happening in the background.

In her opening remarks, Pam talked about not necessarily wanting a premium service. I agree

fully that it does not seem to be a premium service at the outset, but the fact that we have something now should give some individuals hope that they will have somewhere to go in the short term. I appreciate that a lot more work needs to be done to tackle domestic violence.

The Health Minister's comments about the 24-hour call-out service should give comfort to some individuals who are, perhaps, critical of the fact that the centre is not open 24 hours a day. The Minister has been forward-thinking since he came into office. I am not here to be a cheerleader for him, and sometimes I do not agree with what he does, but he will be the first to recognise that, if there is a particular problem and we need to adjust the service to offer more hours, that will be done. I have every confidence that the Minister will rise to that challenge, and I support the fact that the Rowan centre has been built in Antrim.

The Chair of the Health Committee is here. Although the centre is far from her constituency, she has taken a wider interest in the related health issue. Although the centre is complementary to Antrim, it is fairly central for those who will have to travel from other parts of the Province. I assume that this is why that particular site was picked.

I thank Pam for securing the debate.

4.15 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank Pam for bringing forward this afternoon's Adjournment debate. Much of the detail has already been covered. As Trevor said, it is very sad that we have to open a centre to deal with assault referral. It is one of the plights of our society today. It has probably always existed, but was kept very much in the background.

The referrals that the PSNI will make might help those who have suffered an assault to come forward. It might enable evidence to be gathered and ensure that certain people are prosecuted. That is something that happens, because people do not necessarily report it at the time. They wait a length of time, and it is then difficult to gather evidence. When somebody presents to A&E, or is referred by the PSNI, there will be an opportunity to gather evidence. It is good to see a joint approach between the Department of Justice and the Department of Health in relation to the way forward on this matter.

I appreciate that a couple of million pounds has been spent on building a state-of-the-art facility. There have been comments about the structure

of 9.00 am to 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday. We feel that the referral programme, and the counselling which will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, will go some way to dealing with this. However, we ask the Department to look at the volume of people being referred to A&E — perhaps having been brought by the police — who may have been the victims of sexual violence. Sometimes the hours of opening could be looked at to correlate with the peak times when that does happen.

I appreciate that there are a number of factors contributing to why people have suffered. I believe that alcohol and the misuse of drugs fuel a number of the incidents. For certain people, when the drink goes in, the wit goes out. Their moral conscience does not always kick in when it should, and things go further than they were ever meant to. That needs to be looked at.

I welcome the opening of the facility. I hope and pray that we can —

Ms S Ramsey: I thank the Member for giving way. Just to clarify, the Health Committee is not in any way critical of the opening of the centre. We welcome it and want to play our part. Our concern is that we need a twin-track approach. Let the criminal aspect work away, but if we want to help victims become survivors, we need to look seriously at why people are having to wait four months plus for services.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, immediate action needs to be taken. I appreciate that the referral programme comes from outside agencies and feeds into this programme. The Justice Department and what it deals with is one aspect. A bigger problem is the emotional difficulties that the victims have to deal with afterwards. There are also physical difficulties that need to be addressed. Having a facility such as this, which specialises in actually dealing with those aspects that, probably, everyone takes for granted will be dealt with by a hospital or whatever — having somebody who is specially trained to deal with that is vital.

I welcome the Committee's view. I was only referring to the opening hours, and maybe looking for an extension of them, and reviewing that as time goes on. The referral programme coming from the PSNI and A&E is one way. However, from September, there will be the

opportunity for self-referral, which might enable more people to report.

This is the first such centre in Northern Ireland. As such, we are dealing with it on a regional basis. Antrim Area Hospital has a very large catchment area and is literally 30 minutes from Belfast. So, unfortunately, there will be people who have to travel from Belfast to this facility.

This is only maybe the first of many such facilities. I appreciate that there are a number of such facilities throughout the United Kingdom, and I have read the report, which details how they operate and the number of people who present at them. In light of that, I welcome today's debate. I hope that we look at the opening hours further down the line, because that is something that, sadly, we have to address.

Mr McDevitt: I am very happy to contribute to this debate as a member of the Health Committee. As Ms Brown concluded, it is important that we all pay tribute to the courage of men, women and children who report sexual assault, rape and other forms of sexual violence. It takes a huge amount of courage to break out of a crime that is based on one person's attempt to exercise control over another person's body. We are only able to properly debate this because a sufficient number of people find that inner courage and decide to break out of the domination, abuse and control that someone else is trying to exercise, or has exercised, over them.

I also echo what colleagues said about the fact that we must accept that this is only a small part of the problem. The problem is much more widespread than the figures suggest. There is a cultural issue in our society with men in particular finding it impossible to appreciate the right of women, children and other men to their own bodies and the right, sanctity and integrity of someone's body. There is a cultural undercurrent that leads people to think that it is OK to abuse, rape and sexually assault another human being.

One thing that is particularly important about the SARC is that it is healthcare led, in that it looks at the victim of this crime as a human being in need of support, counselling and treatment. Unfortunately, the sad reality is that the victim is also often in need of examination, and, if they are able to allow that to happen, have to consider whether they will allow their body to be considered as a place from which forensic evidence can be retrieved. The context in which things like that happen is very important. It needs to happen somewhere

where someone who has suffered the most awful abuse will immediately feel safe. A healthcare setting is, in our society, the place where people are most likely to feel safe at such a time of crisis.

I share colleagues' concerns about the initial pattern of opening hours that is being proposed. It does not fit, certainly not with our experience in south Belfast, that sexual assaults happen between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm, Monday to Friday. In fact, most of the statistics suggest that sexual assaults occur at weekends and over holiday periods in particular. One of the sad realities of Christmas is that, if I am not mistaken, it is one of the periods with the highest episodes of domestic violence and sexual assaults within existing relationships or within established families.

It is really important from a very early stage that we send out a signal to those who work with people who are victims or those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves as victims of a sexual assault or of sexual violence, that there is somewhere available to them all the time, all year round.

One point that has not been made, which I would like to focus on, is the need to ensure that the existence of this SARC is very well known in the system. PSNI officers across the districts, across the shifts and across functions must know about it and know that they must immediately consider bringing a victim to the SARC or offer that possibility. The same applies to GPs and to men and women who are members of the clergy in all our different faith traditions. It will have to apply to teachers in secondary schools and to university lecturers. I know from personal experience that university lecturers increasingly find themselves indirectly having to pick up some of the issues that arise out of a sexual assault that, for whatever reason, has not been reported immediately.

It will also be very important that, when the centre is open for self-referral, as Mr Girvan said it will be, people know about it. If it is open for self-referral, it seems a bit strange that it will be open only from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm on Monday to Friday. That is not the concept of self-referral. I know, and I think that many of us do because I suspect —

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

Mr McDevitt: I will conclude on this point. I suspect that all of us have encountered people who have found themselves in a crisis situation. They need help then and there, and a

healthcare situation is the place where they are most likely to feel comfortable getting it. I wish the Minister, the Department and the officials every luck with it.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): First, I thank Ms Brown for proposing the Adjournment debate, which provides me with an opportunity to draw attention to a key initiative in raising the standards of care for all victims of sexual violence in Northern Ireland. I have been impressed with the considered and valuable contributions today, and I hope to respond to the points raised during the debate.

All of you will be aware that sexual violence is a problem in Northern Ireland, and you will know that it affects people from all cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds and all age groups. That is borne out by statistics, some of which have been quoted already. In a 12-month period, the PSNI recorded 1,892 offences. That is a huge number, but we believe that it is only the tip of the iceberg.

The sexual assault referral centre, built on the Antrim Area Hospital site and also known as the Rowan, is a joint partnership project between my Department and the PSNI. The specialised centre will offer a range of services for victims of rape and sexual assault, including immediate medical attention, forensic examination and support for victims in making contact with the appropriate agencies and organisations for services such as counselling, criminal procedures, and so on.

The service will go live on Tuesday 7 May 2013, commencing with PSNI referrals in the first instance, before a full roll-out of the service from Monday 2 September 2013. A staged approach to the implementation will enable the new practices and protocols to be embedded and was normal practice for other SARCs previously established in GB. Importantly, as a victim-focused regional facility, one of the key benefits of the SARC will be that people can self-refer from September 2013 onwards.

All victims who are referred to or attend the Rowan will be offered a range of services, including a comprehensive assessment of their needs, and, depending upon those assessed needs, various support and agreed care pathways will be followed. The emotional needs and psychological well-being of the victim will be considered as part of their consultation. The Rowan will be open to deal with a victim at any time on a 24/7 basis, 365 days a year, and all victims seen at the Rowan will receive the same level of specialist support

whether they attend out of hours or during core hours.

In many instances, sexual violence may form part of domestic violence. Where that is the case and children are involved, a referral will be made to social services and child and family services. In such cases, if victims are perceived to be at high risk, a referral will also be made through to MARAC, which is a multiagency approach that puts in place a safety plan for victims of domestic violence who are considered to be at high risk of death or serious injury. Victims will be referred to the appropriate support services, with their consent, and into statutory services, where that is mandatory.

For adult victims who self-refer to the Rowan, staff will provide support in reporting the crime to the PSNI, should they choose to do so. All cases of sexual assault, rape or sexual abuse of children and young people under 18 will be referred to social services.

4.30 pm

The response and support that are offered will reflect the needs and wishes of the victim whom the Rowan is supporting at the time. For those who are in acute distress and who are considered at high risk of suicide, each health and social care trust will provide mental health response teams both for children and adolescents, as well as for adults. Those teams are complemented by the 24/7 support of Lifeline, which my Department funds.

For many victims in the aftermath of an assault, there may be many issues to think about, including counselling. Although some victims may require or request immediate counselling support, others may never opt for formal counselling. If a victim requests counselling, the Rowan will assist in making the necessary onward referral.

My Department recognises the enormous contribution that voluntary organisations have made in tackling sexual violence not only by delivering support services for victims but by developing and influencing government policy. A number of voluntary organisations have been at the forefront and have been instrumental in addressing sexual violence in a very positive and, importantly, an empowering manner. There are a wide range of service providers across Northern Ireland in the statutory and voluntary sectors that deliver services to children, young people and adults who have been sexually assaulted. The Rowan will provide each victim with a copy of the regional

directory of services entitled 'Have You Been Affected by Sexual Violence or Abuse?', which my Department first published in March 2010.

The Rowan will also provide the victim with an information pack to take away that provides detail on what to expect post-assault and that covers issues such as how they might feel, what they may experience and how to take care of themselves.

I hope that Members will join me in congratulating the many agencies that have been involved in establishing this important facility. The Rowan is Northern Ireland's first SARC. It is a significant step forward in supporting the victims of rape and sexual assault in a safe, secure and confidential environment. Working in partnership with the voluntary sector, we will provide better support to the victims and survivors of sexual crime, and we will seek to bring those responsible to justice.

Various Members raised two or three issues during the debate. Mr Kinahan wanted to know about the centre's role in dealing with drug and substance abuse. That is not the purpose of the facility; other facilities specialise in that area. The centre is a sexual assault referral facility. Granted, there will be some who attend who have drug and substance issues, and there will be some who are there because others have drug and substance issues that have been borne out in their behaviour in a very negative way. However, the centre's purpose is to deal with sexual violence. I do not think that that focus should be diluted in any way, shape or form.

The Chairperson of the Committee, Ms Ramsey, raised the issue of NEXUS and waiting times. I can confirm that NEXUS waiting times have come down considerably since this time last year. I believe that that is in no small measure due to the £150,000 of additional funding that it received from Health and Social Care. For example, waiting times for outreach and evening appointments as of 1 April 2012 were 10 to 12 weeks in the Belfast Trust. That is down to five to six weeks. The same drop from 10 to 12 weeks to five to six weeks has occurred in the South Eastern Trust. The waiting time in the Western Trust was four months, and that is now down to two weeks. There are other examples. There has been a considerable reduction in waiting times for NEXUS, which carries out a very important role.

The number and range of Members who stayed this evening for the Adjournment debate is a demonstration of the importance of the issue.

Ms Brown, who secured the debate, has requested a meeting with me and Minister Ford. Minister Ford is quite capable of answering for himself in due course, but I have very happily agreed to meet Ms Brown to talk further about the issues.

Obviously, this is a new project. We are delighted to have the facility. However, it is important that it is not just a lovely building to go to but that the function and purpose for which it has been established actually meets the needs of the people who use it. I will be very keen to ensure that that is the case and that we can satisfy Ms Brown and others that that will be the case. I am happy to have that meeting and to address any issues with which she may feel that there are still weaknesses. We can deal with many of the concerns and ensure that people who are referred, or who self-refer from September, to this facility are dealt with in a caring and compassionate manner and in a safe environment, which will assist them to deal with the trauma that has been inflicted on them and, hopefully, assist the PSNI in bringing prosecutions against the individuals who have inflicted that trauma and bring them to justice for their heinous activities.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for giving way. As you stated, information leaflets and pamphlets being made available to victims of sexual assault can lead victims into further danger if they have to return to their abuser because they have that kind of literature on their person. Will the Minister take on board my comments about the positive role that independent domestic violence advisers could play if they were brought into the SARC, as they are available in some SARCs in other parts of the UK?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions should be relatively brief. On this occasion, I will allow the Minister to respond.

Mr Poots: I understand that my time has gone, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will happily deal with those issues in our meeting with Ms Brown.

Adjourned at 4.37 pm.



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