

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 26 February 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: I advise Members that I will be absent from the Assembly on Monday 4 March on official Assembly business.

Ministerial Statements

Social Housing

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on my proposals for social housing following the fundamental review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). Further to my written statement to the Assembly on 9 January, I want to take this opportunity to address Assembly colleagues and provide more information on the proposed new structures.

The change in structures is required to ensure that we can continue to deliver well-maintained housing stock, improve the focus on strategy and ensure value for money for taxpayers in the future. That restructuring should not be approached with anxiety. Rather, it is an opportunity for us to become more efficient and innovative in delivering and maintaining social housing to taxpayers and tenants alike.

Over the past few years, there have been a number of reports that recommended that it was time to review the structures to ensure future service delivery. In particular, the Savills stock condition survey report on the NIHE housing stock, which was published in May 2009, identified that over £5 billion of investment would be required over the next 30 years to maintain the current NIHE stock, which Northern Ireland obviously cannot afford. It is important that we look at innovative and sustainable ways of providing social housing, in particular how best we can use the capital value of the housing stock and the rental income to secure borrowing to meet the future need.

I want to stress from the outset that I view this as the start of a process of discussion and deliberation during which my Department will engage and consult widely with key stakeholders to develop the detail behind these high-level proposals and to ensure that there is consensus and agreement. I am committed to

working closely with the Social Development Committee and other stakeholders throughout this process.

The Housing Executive has a long track record over the past 40 years of improving social housing stock. My proposals for the reform of social housing are about acknowledging the past achievements in social housing provision whilst clearly focusing on future sustainability and delivery for the benefit of tenants and the taxpayer. The fundamental review of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in 2011 found that the current model and structures no longer allowed optimal delivery of either strategic housing or landlord services. The consensus from a series of meetings with stakeholders concluded that the “do nothing” option was not a realistic solution.

Over the past few weeks since I made the written statement, there has been a lot of unhelpful and perhaps uninformed speculation about my proposals. In light of that and before I outline the proposals, let me say something about what they are not. They are not fully agreed detailed proposals. They are a high-level vision and strategic direction of travel that brings to a new stage much of the discussion and debate that there has been about reform of social housing over the past number of years. It removes the uncertainty about what we are trying to achieve and allows open debate, discussion and consultation on how we can achieve that vision to ensure that we have consensus and agreement. They are not about abolishing the Housing Executive. They are about improving the structures for the delivery of those functions. They do not herald large-scale job losses, and, as I have made clear, the staff in the Housing Executive currently delivering landlord and non-landlord functions will still have to deliver those functions but in different, more focused and financially sustainable structures.

By the end of March 2015, I aim to have in place a sustainable housing system that delivers regional social housing needs through new landlord structures and housing associations and is strategically directed, governed and regulated. There are several proposals that I wish to be explored and developed. First, the Department will continue to have responsibility for overall housing strategy, policy, legislation and funding. Such a model recognises the key role of the Minister, the Executive and the Assembly in establishing and scrutinising the overall housing strategy and priorities for Northern Ireland. My publication of the draft housing strategy for

Northern Ireland, 'Facing the Future', on 15 October clearly shows the lead role that is expected of and should be delivered by the Minister and the Department responsible for housing.

Secondly, I want to ensure robust regulation and inspection of the housing sector. That is an essential element of any new structures. The Department operates a robust regulation and inspection regime that provides assurance to the Minister and accounting officer on the quality of services provided by and governance of the housing sector. I want the landlord function of the Housing Executive to clearly operate in that regime, be subject to inspection and be required to register with the Department, as do all other social housing providers. I propose to expand on the existing powers of regulation to include additional powers of intervention and direction where shortcomings are found. That will be within a robust regulatory framework that provides assurances to me, as Minister, and to the Committee that social housing providers that receive public funds are operating appropriately.

In the context of a rent-setting regime, I propose that an independent social housing rent panel is established to agree annual rent levels within the parameters of a fiscal rental policy based on affordability set by me, as Minister, and subject to the scrutiny of the Assembly. This is a critical issue, and it is important to stress that rent policy will be set by the Minister.

I intend that the current Housing Executive non-landlord functions will fall under the remit of a Northern Ireland regional housing body. A number of key housing operations and services currently undertaken by the Housing Executive will need to be delivered at a regional level. This will be a body of housing professionals and experts providing and delivering key operational strategies and services — in effect, the non-landlord functions — including but not limited to administration of the common selection scheme; assessment of need; the social housing development programme; warm homes; and Supporting People. I am clear that these key functions will remain with the regional housing body. Currently, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive is classified as a public corporation. The development of these proposals will require legislative change and include consideration of the most appropriate vehicle for such a body — for example, a non-departmental public body or an agency. In either case, there will be a need to review the governance and board structures to take

account of the legislative changes and the new roles and responsibilities.

I support the case for separating the landlord function to both allow appropriate focus on this area of service provision to tenants and to ensure that the landlord function can access private funding to allow suitable investment. The case for the separation of the new landlord function and the positioning of it within the housing association movement is dependent on agreement on the financial considerations, notably the reclassification of the new body being outwith the public sector. Key to this and central to the consideration of the right structures — this is why I referred to the housing association movement — is that we need structures that will be acceptable to and therefore funded by the financial institutions. They will need to have the confidence of the financial institutions. The design process will consider how this can be achieved, looking at the current housing association model and the potential for bespoke bodies to take this forward. Another consideration is how to effectively engage tenants in this process to ensure a focus on tenant services and social housing delivery and improvement. I have no preconceptions of how many landlords there will be, as this will be subject to further analysis, including financial consideration, economic appraisals and engagement with key stakeholders.

To establish effective local government liaison, I propose to review the role of the Housing Council. The Housing Council was established in 1971 and is an advisory and consultative body that considers any matter affecting housing referred to it by the Department or the Housing Executive. The Housing Council is made up of one nominee from each of the current 26 councils. In considering the proposed new housing structures, I was mindful of the need to look at the role of the Housing Council, both in this context and taking account of the role of the Assembly and Assembly scrutiny, and the local government reform proposals and the future functions of councils. The Housing Council in its present format and structure is not the best model for the new system. I propose to consult on the best means to achieve local council engagement in relation to housing matters.

My departmental officials have commenced the programme of work to explore and develop these proposals, the first steps of which have only begun since the written statement was made. On the day that the statement was made, my officials held discussions with the chief executive and the Housing Executive

director of personnel and management services to address primary staff concerns and to work jointly to allay staff anxieties. My officials and I have met other stakeholders in the few short weeks since the written statement was issued — the NIHE board, NIPSA, the Social Development Committee, the Housing Council and the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations — to further dialogue that began under the review of the NIHE and to begin the process of collaborative working on taking the proposals forward and addressing concerns. In particular, the Social Development Committee has a key part to play in providing scrutiny of the design of the new structures.

10.45 am

My Department is developing a programme of work to fully explore and design my proposals. A programme board has been established that includes the chief executive of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, to provide oversight of the delivery of this reform. The board's first meeting was held on 28 January.

I am committed to working collaboratively on this process, and I am keen to explore all options for the delivery of sustainable social housing both for tenants and taxpayers. I am committed to ensuring that the implications for staff arising from future structural changes are carefully managed. A detailed programme of projects will be established to deliver reform changes, and human resource issues will be a key aspect of that. Processes for communication and engagement with staff and their representatives will be an important part of the overall work programme.

I want to make one matter very clear. Much has been achieved in housing over the past 40 years. However, changes need to occur if we want to ensure that social housing in Northern Ireland can be a success for the next 40 years. The PwC report concluded and stakeholders agreed:

"do nothing' is not an option."

Now is the time for change.

The strategic direction, as set out in my proposed plans, is not without its challenges. However, it sets out a compelling and sustainable future vision for new structures to support the future development and delivery of housing in Northern Ireland. It is my belief that this is what we need to do to support the most vulnerable in our society, and my Executive

colleagues have supported the exploration of the proposals. I trust that colleagues across the Chamber will also endorse this approach.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your indulgence, I will make a few remarks on behalf of the Social Development Committee. I thank the Minister for his statement to the Assembly.

I have had the opportunity to discuss some of these matters at length with the Minister prior to this. The Committee has taken a keen interest in the need to take housing issues forward in this mandate. Although welfare reform has rightly dominated the Committee's programme of work until now, the Committee has argued the need for an overarching housing strategy. The future provision of social housing is, of course, a key element of that.

The Committee has acknowledged the Minister's assurance that this announcement heralds almost a blank canvas that will provide the opportunity for all stakeholders, including tenants, to have a real say in shaping social housing going into the future. The Committee also welcomes the Minister's confirmation that there are no predetermined outcomes for the precise model for the delivery of the landlord function.

The Committee is keen to work with the Minister and his Department in the time ahead, and it is committed to doing so not only so that it can scrutinise the Department's work in this very important area of social policy but so that it can help the Minister and his Department to shape the proposals. As the Minister said, the aim is to make sure that this is a positive development — I believe that it can and will be — so that we will end this mandate setting housing structures and can go into the next mandate and the next 20 or 30 years on a very positive and solid foundation. That means that we can ensure that the people we collectively represent who are in need of a home will get that home and a roof over their head.

Ms P Bradley: I also thank the Minister for his statement. One of the issues that will be in the mind of many Housing Executive tenants will be the sort of benefits that can come from this reform package. Will the Minister give some details of any stock transfers that have already taken place and say how the issue of improvements and rents can be dealt with?

Mr McCausland: I will address the transfer of stock to housing associations. The first to take

place was the Rinmore scheme in Londonderry. That was a good example. There were a total of 55 houses in Rinmore, an area in Creggan in Londonderry. That scheme transferred from the Housing Executive to Apex. Of the 55 properties, 14 have had improvements completed, with the rent charge increasing accordingly. Four are currently undergoing improvements, and the rent charge has not changed at this stage. Improvements to the remaining 37 properties have not yet commenced, and, again, the rent charge has not changed.

There are good examples of work that will be carried forward: multi-element improvements to kitchens, rewiring bathrooms and improving installation and energy efficiency. There are two critical factors in the transfer. First, tenants have been able to benefit from properties that have been significantly improved through the housing association being able to lever in private finance to fund the work, which is something that simply would not have been achieved from the public purse alone. Secondly, throughout the process, tenants were made fully aware of the implications of the transfer for them, not only in improving their home but in other matters.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his long statement. It is disappointing that he said little apart from wishing to "explore" and "develop" proposals for which there is already scant detail. Given that, in July 2012, the Minister accused the Housing Executive of having failed its tenants, I am sure that neither he nor his party, for a series of other reasons, will be sad to see it go. Will he tell us about the future for undeveloped land owned by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive?

Mr McCausland: The Member refers to comments that I made about failures and shortcomings in the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. I am sure that the concerns that I expressed at that time were shared by Members from all parties across the Chamber, because there were serious matters to do with the quality of delivery for tenants and serious questions about the value for money of some of the management and maintenance contracts.

I have had real concerns about the operation of the Housing Executive since coming into the Department. Therefore, I believe that we are going in the right direction of travel. We are in a better place than we were. We have a new chairman and vice-chairman who have brought great expertise and experience to the Housing Executive, and that has been transformative. We also have a new chief executive. A lot of

good work is going on, and there is a good relationship there moving forward.

The Member asked questions about the structure and so on. All those things will be teased out over the next while. The land currently in the ownership of the Housing Executive is a valuable asset. There is work to be done on all these things. We want to ensure that a full business case is worked out for every aspect of the process and every opportunity and every possible line of travel is explored. I do not want to start closing down anything at this stage. We need to start exploring ways in which to get the best outcome and best value for tenants and taxpayers.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the proper manner in which it was brought to the House. The Minister's aim to have a new system and new structures in place by the end of this mandate is ambitious. On the landlord function, his statement indicates the potential for bespoke bodies to be looked at. At this early stage, can the Minister give any details of how those bespoke bodies might look or operate?

Mr McCausland: There are two points there. First, we should be ambitious, and the people of Northern Ireland deserve that we be ambitious, so that we get the best possible outcome as soon as possible. That is for the benefit of tenants and the taxpayer. Secondly, it would be presumptuous of and inappropriate for me to spell out at this stage what the bespoke structures might be. That is the work that the programme oversight body now needs to take forward. Every opportunity will be afforded for input. If the Member has particular views and ideas, those will certainly be welcomed. We will take views from the Social Development Committee and other stakeholders as we move forward.

I say in passing — I made this comment earlier — that it is important that we make sure that, whatever form it takes, the landlord function has the confidence of the financial institutions so that we get the benefit of drawing in private sector money.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his statement. I must say that it is somewhat concerning and startling that a statement of this significance on the most fundamental reform of housing in years has failed to make any reference to the deeply segregated nature of housing in Northern Ireland. I ask the Minister what support and challenges he will give to the new structures to ensure that they meet the Belfast

Agreement requirement to encourage and facilitate shared and mixed housing in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCausland: That point has been made on a number of occasions by Members of the Alliance Party. I will simply say that we are dealing here with the social housing sector. Segregation is also a factor in the private sector. Many areas where everyone is a homeowner are as deeply segregated as any other, so it is not unique to the social housing sector. Moving forward, we also need to bear in mind that social housing segregation can often also be related to other forms of segregation. The Member will be aware that we have segregated education and we have sporting organisations that are effectively segregated. All these things are interrelated because they are all part of society, and they impact on each other and on where people want and decide to live.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. One of the issues that will have to be dealt with will be the significant stock transfer from the Housing Executive. Can the Minister give an indication of his assessment of the capability of the housing association sector to deal with that possible transfer?

Mr McCausland: At the moment, the housing association sector in Northern Ireland has 34,000 houses. We have 29 associations. There are mergers going on. Six associations are currently suspended from developing, and 23 are free to develop. So, it is a mixed story. There are encouraging aspects, and there are some that are not so encouraging and require a lot of support. That having been said, even the largest association has 4,600 properties, so you are dealing with associations with fewer than 5,000 houses. We are dealing here with 90,000 stock. There is a huge disparity there. That is why, at an earlier stage, I spoke about bespoke housing associations.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It certainly puts more flesh on the bones of the future of housing and where the strategic direction will be over the next 30 years. However, is it not the Minister's intention to break the landlord function into three separate bodies that would see a north-western housing association, a Belfast housing association and a south-eastern housing association, each containing 30,000 houses? If that is the case, would it not be detrimental to

dealing with social need and high housing demand?

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

Mr McCausland: On the question of whether you would break it up into three separate associations or whatever, all these things are still to be explored. There is some evidence from initial conversations with the financial institutions that they would prefer and be more favourable towards a number of housing associations or bodies rather than a single one, but all that is open to discussion over the next while. Nothing is predetermined. If that is a view that the Member wishes to put forward, I will be happy to consider it.

Mr Anderson: I also thank the Minister for his detailed statement. In relation to good housing standards, will the restructuring of housing lead to a better standard of housing for the many tenants of the Housing Executive who live in homes without cavity walls and, therefore, have no wall insulation, which results in them facing real fuel poverty due to huge heating costs that they can ill afford?

11.00 am

Mr McCausland: The Member touches on an important point, which is that we have to face up to the backlog of work in maintaining the quality of stock. The £5 billion of investment that I said would be required over the next 30 years is a significant figure. In the short term, about £1 billion worth of work is required, and that money is simply not there at the moment.

The Member highlighted the issue of the quality of housing. There are about 9,000 social housing stock properties in Northern Ireland that date to just after the Second World War. In fact, many were built in the 1950s, without wall cavities and, therefore, have no cavity wall insulation. In the past, the issue may not have been as immediate but it certainly is now when fuel prices are rising and people are much affected by fuel poverty.

As a result of having no cavity wall insulation, those houses are very hard to heat. There can also be issues of dampness and other problems that flow from that. There needs to be major investment if we are to deal with that sort of work. I am concerned not only that we move forward with our housing development programme but that we ensure that tenants in older properties are enabled to live in a property that is fit for the present century and easy to heat. At the moment, 9,000 properties do not

meet those standards, so there is a huge amount of work to be done. That was identified as a piece of work to be explored as to the best way forward.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his statement, which dispelled a little of the mist but not a lot. At the risk of sounding cynical, is the Housing Executive, having failed to keep its properties properly maintained over the years, now divesting itself of them at virtually no cost to the housing associations? How many landlords will then be there to pick up the pieces? Has any financial work or an economic appraisal been done on the whole exercise vis-à-vis switching particular estates to housing associations, presumably at a knock-down price? How can we ensure out of all of that, Minister, that new building will be going ahead on top of the maintenance that we are hoping will be done by those associations that will gain the houses?

Mr McCausland: I would encourage the Member to read the PwC report, which did quite a lot of work on exploring the best way forward. He asked whether calculations were done. Of course they were done. That was part of the PwC report. Now, as we move forward to the next stage of the process, everything will be assessed as to the financial viability, the best outcome and what produces the best result. This is all about producing a better outcome for the people of Northern Ireland, for the tenants and the taxpayers.

It is clear that many tenants — and the figure of 9,000 tenants was mentioned — are still living in post-war properties that do not have cavity wall insulation. That is simply unacceptable in this day and age. When you look at an issue such as that, the shambles over some of the maintenance contracts that we had with the Housing Executive, and the difficulties with contractors, it is clear that we need to change the situation. Doing nothing is not an option but everything will be properly assessed as we move forward.

I am not clear as to the reasons for the Member's doubts about the need for this. I think that it is absolutely essential.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. The statement referred to the strategic arm of housing; the non-landlord functions; administration of the common selection scheme; assessment of need; the social housing development programme; warm homes; and supporting people. Where does the administration of housing benefit fit in with

those proposals? Will it be taken on by another Department or will it be administered by the private sector?

Mr McCausland: The issue of housing benefit is now subsumed into universal credit, so that process is being worked through the Assembly, albeit somewhat slowly.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aíre. On the ninety-odd thousand houses presently in the management of the Housing Executive, would their future not be better placed under the management of a single landlord?

Mr McCausland: Some people have suggested three; some have suggested one; I have heard people suggest five. All sorts of numbers are floating about. That is a piece of work that is still to be carried out. In due course, when we have had a full exploration and full consultation with stakeholders, the Social Development Committee and everyone with a potential input, we will come to a conclusion. It would be totally wrong, and I am sure Members would not expect me to do so, to prejudge the outcome of a consultation and deliberation that is only just starting.

Mr Allister: In the early part of his statement, the Minister reminded us that the stock condition survey, back in 2009, showed that, over the next 30 years, there would need to be investment of £5 billion — money that we could not afford. The Minister's magic bullet seems to be to get in private money. How does he then square the circle of interesting the private sector to that extent while, at the same time, maintaining rents at an affordable level? Is that not really the challenge that the Minister faces? How does he intend to meet the financial deficit while keeping the rents at an affordable level?

Mr McCausland: That is a question that the Member has asked previously. It is clear that £5 billion worth of work is to be done over a period of time. That would be funded through borrowing from financial institutions. That is now the practice elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Go to Glasgow or other parts of Scotland, England and Wales, and you will see that that is now the way in which housing is structured. So, we are getting in line with others who have already moved down this road. Financial institutions do have an interest in this. They are prepared to invest, if we have the right structure.

As to the level of rents, I will be setting the framework and policy within which the new social housing rent panel will operate. That will be subject to Assembly scrutiny. The panel will be an advisory body that will set annual rent levels within the overall policy framework based around the fundamental principles of affordability and sustainability. The social housing reform programme will develop the details of how the panel will be established and the parameters in which it will operate.

The Member is, I presume, also referring to the fact that, in general, housing association rents are a bit higher than Housing Executive rents. However, look, for example, at the cost to those 9,000 people living in houses with no cavity walls and no cavity wall insulation. Look at the amount of money they are spending on fuel to produce heat that is going out through the walls. Set that against any modest rent increase, and you will see that they would probably be in a better financial position than they are at the moment. Good housing that is structurally energy efficient and cuts costs is bound to be for the good of tenants. That is the direction in which we need to move.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he detail for the House the current subvention from the Northern Ireland block grant to the Housing Executive?

Mr McCausland: In subvention to the Housing Executive, in 2012-13, the total funding provided from the Northern Ireland block grant is £307 million. Excluding the funding that relates to the programmes administered on behalf of DSD, the SHDP, grants, etc, the net subvention to the Housing Executive is around £75 million this year. Rental income this year is around £270 million, and, with annual increases of retail price index (RPI) plus 1%, which is the norm, rents collectable increases by about £10 million each year. That is the current level of subvention to the Housing Executive.

Schools: Area Planning

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Le do chhead, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh ar an obair phleanáil ceantair atá déanta go data agus soiléiriú a dhéanamh ar an bhealach a ba mhian liom an próiseas a chur chun cinn le linn an trasdula i dtreo ÚSO. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the area planning work that has been undertaken to date and set out how I intend to move the process forward during the transition towards the Education and Skills Authority (ESA).

In the delivery of public services, it is essential to plan for the future to ensure that provision is appropriate to best meet the needs of the population. We have a legacy of some 1,100 schools that were established along sectoral lines, without sufficient efforts to strategically plan the pattern of provision. In future, we need a planned network of educationally and financially sustainable schools that are capable of delivering the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework.

In September 2011, I commissioned the education and library boards, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the other sectors, to develop area plans based on meeting the future educational needs of our young people. That process was grounded in the Department's sustainable schools policy. Seo an chéad uair ar tugadh faoi phleanáil straitéiseach le haghaidh soláthar oideachais ar an scála seo. This is the first time that strategic planning for education provision has been undertaken on that scale. It was the first time that sectors had been asked to plan together. I wanted the planning authorities to set aside individual, sectoral or institutions' needs and focus on how, as a society, we could best provide for the needs of all children and young people in an area.

The sustainable schools policy sets out the minimum number of pupils needed for schools to be deemed sustainable. Too many have focused on that minimum rather than on assessing the practicalities involved in delivering the entitlement framework as part of an education system that is fit for the 21st century. However, I have always made it clear, and I reiterate it now: area planning is not about budget cuts or school closures simply to save money. It is about strong, vibrant schools using the limited resources that we have, efficiently and effectively, to secure better outcomes for all children and young people. It

is not about what is best for an institution; it is about what is best for pupils.

I turn now to the viability audit. To ensure there was a common understanding of the challenges facing education here, I believed that we needed to provide comprehensive information on each and every school. So, information on the quality of provision, enrolment levels and financial capability was drawn together for each school. They were known as the viability audits, which were published by the boards in March 2012.

For the first time, parents and the wider public had access to information about the level of pressure some schools were facing and would continue to face into the future. I think I can safely say that they sparked an important and, sometimes, heated debate. The audits were maligned in some quarters and misquoted or misused in others, but they helped us all to understand the extent of the problems facing our education system and allowed informed debate and discussions, which would not have happened previously, to occur.

Going forward, I want to ensure that schools, parents and stakeholders continue to have that information available. I want to see the ongoing mature debate that is needed to deliver practical area solutions. Therefore, today, I am reporting that my Department will build on the viability audits. My officials will identify relevant, up-to-date information at school and area level on such issues as finance, enrolment and performance, and I will require the boards, and, subsequently, ESA, to publish that information annually, commencing in April of this year. That information will be designed to give the public a clear picture of the shape of education provision in their area.

I turn now to post-primary plans. I took receipt of the post-primary plans at the end of December 2012. That followed a public consultation exercise with almost 50,000 responses. That level of response is to be welcomed. There were individual responses from parents, pupils, school governors and staff, education sectoral bodies, elected representatives and the wider public. Some responses were petitions about saving individual schools that were perceived to be under threat, while others took a more strategic view about the vision for the future of our education system.

The consultation responses recognised the underlying issues and the need for change. However, I recognise that change is never easy. Overall, there was a desire for greater

clarity on the proposals, more opportunity for engagement and greater consistency across the plans. There was a call for more innovative ideas and a willingness to explore more cross-sectoral solutions.

11.15 am

A LeasCheann Comhairle, in moving forward with area planning, we will endeavour to take those underlying themes on board. I take this opportunity to thank those who are responsible for the development of the plans. They sought to respond to the challenges that were laid down. My Department has assessed the draft area plans against the terms of reference and guidance. Although the plans do not totally meet the terms of reference that I set out, they do, in some areas, contain sound proposals. I regard them as the foundation on which to move forward.

Some areas of the plans are well developed. For example, there are firm proposals in Lurgan for amalgamations in the Catholic maintained sector. I know that many people have done a lot of soul-searching, and I am pleased to say that, by assessing the issues realistically, a very practical solution has been arrived at that is in the best interest of young people.

In Enniskillen, the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) articulated a clear plan for the controlled and voluntary grammar sector. I have announced that that will now be advanced in planning. Again, with regard to the Western Board area, I confirm today that I am moving ahead with the Programme for Government (PFG) commitment to develop the Lisanelly site as a shared education campus and the area-planning solution for Omagh. I will inform the relevant schools' managing authorities that future investment in the Omagh area will be prioritised towards schools being built on the Lisanelly site.

Not surprisingly, there are many areas where there are a number of interrelated complexities to address. They will require a good deal more work to bring about an agreed solution.

An area-planning solution for west Belfast remains elusive. I find that unacceptable, particularly in the light of the most recent report into child poverty, which highlighted west Belfast as having the highest levels of child poverty. A proven way out of poverty is quality education. CCMS and the Commission for Catholic Education need to bring forward definitive plans that provide equality of access to quality education for all the children of west Belfast without further delay.

Also In Belfast, we are faced with a particular situation with the number of young people who currently travel into the city. Over 12,000 pupils travel into Belfast from other areas every day, and almost 10,000 of them come from the South Eastern Education and Library Board (SEELB) area. We need to ask ourselves whether that is what we want for the future. Is it sustainable economically, educationally and environmentally? I will commission a specific piece of work to look at that issue. I want all sectors to be involved. I want dialogue with schools and communities that will result in practical long-term solutions. The pattern of provision in the corridor between the South Eastern Board and the Belfast Board areas is an area on which I believe that more focused and detailed work is required. I will also ask the relevant boards to give that immediate attention.

With regard to the next steps, I have written today to the chairpersons of the boards and CCMS outlining the Department's views on each of the area plans and setting out how I plan to move forward. I have also directed that the plans that were submitted to me in December 2012 should be made available to the public on the boards' websites.

I have highlighted specifically a number of areas where I wish to see action. They include, for all boards, further development of a single approach to area planning and the presentation and content of the area plans; introduction of an appropriate mechanism to facilitate active engagement between all sectors to ensure that each has the opportunity to influence the proposals; and development of an action plan to deal with the specific priority areas and to address gaps in the area plans.

Planning to plan is not enough. We need to build on the achievements to date and to maintain the momentum on area planning. The time for endless discussion is over. It is now time for decisions.

As we move towards ESA, my Department will provide clarity and leadership on area planning. In the coming weeks, my officials will work closely with each board and CCMS on the details of their area plans and on where further work is needed.

To co-ordinate and oversee the continuing development of area plans, I will establish an area-planning steering group to be chaired by the deputy permanent secretary. The group's work programme will be aimed at filling the gaps in the current draft plans, embedding a single approach to area planning and identifying

priority areas for action in the short to medium term. Membership of the group will include the controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors.

The primary area plans that I commissioned were received in my Department at the end of January 2013. I have directed that they be released for consultation on 19 March, with an extended consultation period open until the end of June. That will allow for wide-ranging discussion. My intention is that dialogue at local level, taking on board the lessons learned in the post-primary process, will result in more practical and sustainable solutions, including the potential, where appropriate, for increased sharing of accommodation and resources. I am also conscious that my response to the recently published independent review of the common funding scheme is likely to impact on primary school planning in the medium to long term. However, I am clear that we cannot delay. We must press ahead with planning in the primary sector.

We must ensure that our primary education sector can continue to demonstrate its ability to perform at the highest international level, as illustrated by the recent progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS) and trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) report. That means that we need to ensure that our schools are focused on quality of teaching and learning, not struggling to survive.

Change of this scale needs to be managed, and we will continue to take account of the constraints on recurrent and capital budgets that we are facing in the coming years. School budgets need to be used to maximise the impact for the benefit of children and young people.

I have made clear that the new school building programme needs to support strong, vibrant schools that are capable of delivering high-quality education long into the future. My recent announcements on the school building programme have been grounded in the principles of area planning and the work done to date. Investment will continue to be targeted at proposals where there is clarity and agreement on the shape of area provision. I will say to managing authorities, schools and their communities that it is now time to look to the future. Protracted debate and avoidance of decision-making will mean delayed or no investment.

Area plans for special schools were submitted to my Department in February 2012. Some of

the plans included special units alongside the consideration of dedicated special school facilities. That made it difficult to determine an overall regional picture of the highly specialised facilities needed to support our most vulnerable children. The plans also predated the finalisation of the special educational needs review. I have decided that we need a co-ordinated regional assessment of future need for dedicated special schools. Therefore, I am commissioning the development of a regional plan for those schools, which will aim to be completed within six months of the commencement date.

A Cheann Comhairle, mar fhocal scoir, creidim go bhfuil réadú atá ag méadú go bhfuil athrú ag tástail agus ag tarlú. There is a growing realisation that change is needed and is happening. Area planning is the key to securing the changes needed to make our education system capable of competing with and, hopefully, exceeding the achievements of the best in the world. To make that happen, we need to be progressive and forward-thinking. Most of all, we need to show leadership. That means leadership at every level. We need to set aside any form of self-interest and put the interests of all our children and young people at the centre of the process. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to the Minister's statement. He referred several times to the viability audit that took place. Has he absolutely confirmed in his mind that the information in that audit is 100% accurate? There is some anecdotal information that suggests that false targets were set for some schools, which put them into stress in the audit when, in reality, only around 25 post-primary schools are in stress. Does the Minister concede that there may be issues around the accuracy of the audit?

Mr O'Dowd: I cannot comment on the accuracy of the audits because they have not been published. They will be published in April. However, I assure the Member that a robust process will be put in place to check the authenticity of the information in the documents. The viability audit that was published previously was proof-checked with the schools involved. I understand that all the documents were passed by the schools and managing authorities before they were published. I am aware of one or two cases in which schools questioned documents following their publication. Doubts were cast about some of the information. However, that was only in one or two cases that were brought to my attention.

I assure the Member that we will liaise with the Education Committee on the information that will be published in the documents. I am not fixated on the title "viability audits", as that may throw up the wrong assumptions about what the document is about. We will choose an appropriate title and check with the Education Committee what information it believes should be contained in it and how that information should be validated, etc. We will move forward from there.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement to the House. I especially welcome his commitment to examine the ongoing practice of bussing more than 10,000 pupils from the south-eastern region in and out of Belfast each day. For seven years, I was one of those pupils, and I know only too well how long a school day can be when you are required to travel on four or five buses a day just to get to and from school. Moreover, given that many of our inner-city communities suffer from educational underachievement, that practice of feeding the proliferation of selective schools in Belfast is definitely not benefiting the communities they are there to serve. Will the Minister give a commitment to look at that when he moves forward with the focused work on this issue?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. When we look at the information about inner-city Belfast and at where some of the selective schools are placed, it is clear that they are not benefiting the local communities around them.

As you put it, 10,000 pupils from the South Eastern Education and Library Board area and 12,000 pupils in total are bussed into Belfast every day to attend school. Now, it is a major city and you would expect a certain amount of flow into it. However, questions have been asked about whether some of the selective schools are in the right place in the greater Belfast area, or whether they should go to where the main draw of their catchment is. I am not answering those questions. They have been posed to me, and we need to put in a mechanism that will bring us to the answers and how we move forward in the future.

Clearly, in education provision in inner Belfast, I have posed the question about west Belfast, but that question could also be asked of north Belfast. What is being done to ensure that those who live in inner-city Belfast or in socially deprived areas are gaining access high-quality schools? The area plans do not answer those

questions, but I believe that the answers are easily accessible.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for a very welcome statement. There is much in it that we have been calling for, but I particularly welcome the, as he put it, "more opportunity for engagement". Despite the consultation process getting lots of answers, there is still a mass of parents and teachers who do not know what is going on. When we get to the steering group, which I welcome, how will he make sure that it actually listens to principals and teachers, those who are not on it and, particularly, the voluntary grammars as well?

Mr O'Dowd: The role of the steering group is to examine the plans as they are currently formatted and to see how we can close the gaps in those plans. If there are dramatic changes to the plans as a result of those further discussions, and in circumstances where firmer proposals come out, there will be a need for consultation. However, in even the exercise of getting the plans in to shape, there will be a need for further discussion with local communities, schools and community leaders in those areas — whether that be informal or formal discussions around these matters. The key point that we have to get to is the decision-making. I emphasise again that future investment will be made in areas where decisions are made. Protracted conversations and the avoidance of decision-making is not the way forward for this matter.

There are lessons to be learned from the post-primary area planning process and from how the boards conducted the consultation process. I want this to be more hands on, and I want communities, school leaders and community and political leaders to be involved. That will not necessarily be a simple paper exercise; it has to be face to face as often as possible. I also want people to involve themselves not in the needs of individual schools, but in what it says on the tin. This is about area plans; let us discuss the educational needs of areas, rather than bogging ourselves down with the needs of individual schools.

11.30 am

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. I note his concern about "finance, enrolment and performance" and that he does not want children travelling around the country. I also note that he met the UN representative on the rights of the child recently. Will he reassure me that rural children, families and communities will have the same access to

education services that is enjoyed by their urban counterparts as area planning progresses?

Mr O'Dowd: I assure the Member of that, and he will note that my sustainable schools policy was rural-proofed. Any future policies or decisions that flow will also be rural-proofed.

I am glad that he mentioned my meeting with the Chairperson of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The meeting with that gentleman, who has since given a speech to representatives of the community in Belfast, was very informative. There is a responsibility on us all to ensure that the commitments of the UN rights of the child are delivered, and I ask all parties to examine their own positions and policies to ensure that they are in line with the recommendations of the UN Rights of the Child Committee.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for his statement, towards the start of which is the interesting line that he wants:

"the planning authorities to set aside individual sectoral or institution needs".

Yet, from this process so far, it is hard to draw any conclusion other than it will be an exercise in area planning within existing sectors. Is the Minister prepared to give a commitment that, in the right circumstances, the Department will honour its obligation to encourage and facilitate the integrated sector and will actively consider that model, if it is the best option, taking into account parental preference and all other considerations?

Mr O'Dowd: I will defend robustly anywhere that my Department has stood up to its responsibilities to facilitate and promote the integrated education sector. However, as the Member said, it is a sector: can he guarantee me that, when the integrated sector goes into a room as a member of the steering group that I will set up, it will discuss education in its totality rather than the needs of the integrated sector? Will the Irish-medium sector go in and simply discuss its needs? Will the boards or indeed the CCMS go in with the same approach?

In my view, they are responsible enough to go into that steering group and discuss education needs in their totality and present their points of view on education. However, when it comes down to the planning and decision-making, I believe that all the sectors that will be represented around that table are more than capable of looking at the picture holistically, of

ensuring that we come forward with plans that meet the needs of our education system in its totality and of placing a greater emphasis on sharing within education.

One of the reasons that I have established the steering group is that I am not satisfied that enough account was taken of all sectors' needs during the previous process. The Irish-medium sector and the integrated sector had lobbied me heavily to be on the previous body. I did not agree with them at that stage; but when I reflect on the current area plans, I believe that there is a need for them to be on the next steering group. They will be represented there, but as educationalists to bring forward area plans and not just to speak about the needs of their individual sectors.

Lord Morrow: The Minister talks in his statement about three actions points, the second of which is to craft an inclusive consultation process. He goes on to tell us that this inclusive process:

"will include the controlled, maintained, integrated and Irish-medium sectors".

Where does the voluntary grammar sector sit in this inclusive process?

Mr O'Dowd: I have not ruled out the inclusion of the voluntary grammar sector. The question that I have not answered —

Lord Morrow: You did not rule it in.

Mr O'Dowd: You have the answer as well as the question? You are brilliant. You have the answer as well as the question. Had I known that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr O'Dowd: — If I had known that, I could have done without making the statement — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Minister will resume his seat. I have to tell both of you to make your remarks through the Chair, please.

Mr O'Dowd: I was just saying, Mr Deputy Speaker, that if I had known that, I could have stayed at home and he could have made the statement, asked the questions and answered them.

I have not included the voluntary grammar sector because of the question of who represents it in planning at an area-based level.

Mr Allister: The Governing Bodies Association (GBA).

Mr O'Dowd: Does it? The Member is hinting to me that it is the GBA. If the voluntary grammar sector comes back to me and confirms that the GBA can act as its representative body in discussions on the totality of education, I will certainly take that into consideration. However, I want to be assured that those bodies that will sit around the table are there to represent the sector that they say they will represent and will enter those discussions based on the needs of education in its totality. So, let us have that discussion. I have no difficulty with having that discussion or that confirmation. I have not ruled them out. You are right that they are not on the list, but I have not ruled them out.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Does he agree with me on what can be achieved by area planning? We only have to look at the unique achievements in the Strabane schools estate, with the amalgamation of the town's two post-primary schools and the ongoing amalgamation of some of the primary schools. That is one of the best examples of area planning being tried, tested and proven to work for the educational provision of our young people in Strabane. It is a good model for going forward. Does the Minister agree with that?

Mr O'Dowd: I think Strabane is a very good example of how area planning can and should work. It has not been an easy journey for either the controlled sector or the maintained sector in Strabane in reaching the decisions that they have made, but they have reached those decisions. They have made firm decisions on the way forward. The maintained sector has moved forward with the newbuild facility at Holy Cross College, and it is moving forward from strength to strength. The controlled sector is now moving forward as well. I have confirmed that its schools will move forward with area planning. A new school will be built, which will service the needs of the entire community in the Strabane area.

That is proof, if proof were needed, that area planning can work, and area planning will be backed up by the Minister and the Department with future investment. There are other examples, such as in Lurgan, where schools are coming together. Again, there were difficult

and emotional discussions, but people have made the right decisions about the future of education in the area, and it can be done. I say to other areas that, when they are in doubt, they should look around for other examples of where it is working. Strabane is a fine example of where it is working.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister has made his statement, and I certainly heard a lot of words, but, unfortunately, not a lot of substance. Nonetheless, will the Minister detail a timeline of the next steps that he referred to in the statement? He said that we need to set aside any form of self-interest. Does that include the Minister?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, it does include the Minister. I am open and frank with the House. If I had the legislative ability — I assume that you are referring to academic selection — I would bring a proposal to the House to have the phased removal of academic selection, similar to that proposed by the previous Minister, Catriona Ruane, over a three-year period. I would bring that forward. I am not going to get agreement on that at this stage, but that does not stop me working away to persuade people to move away from academic selection.

Area planning, however, is not simply about academic selection, although academic selection does have an impact on it. We have talked about the 12,000 people travelling into Belfast, the needs of the controlled sector and the needs of the maintained sector, and stuck in the middle of that is a group of voluntary grammar schools, which need to be facilitated. I will find out how we can facilitate them, but they also need to play their part in area planning and engage with the educational partners around them. Everyone has to have a bit of give and take in relation to how we move forward with area planning. My position not being achieved does not stop area planning moving forward. Others' positions not being achieved will not stop area planning moving forward.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Given that area plans for special schools were submitted a year ago, why has it taken so long for the announcement of a regional assessment? Are children in special schools being left behind?

Mr O'Dowd: No, I do not believe that they are being left behind. We are quite lucky that our special schools estate is delivering a very good service to our young people. I introduced special needs area planning because I wanted

to find out about the initial landscape of it. I used that initial plan to make a number of decisions about capital builds in relation to area planning around special needs facilities. I made a decision on a special needs school in Ballymena and one in west Belfast, the St Gerard's Educational Resource Centre, etc. So, the information has been used, but further work needs to be done as regards our special needs schools. We need to look at it on a regional basis.

The previous document that looked at special needs schools looked at units at schools, etc. I want a more focused piece of work around our special needs schools, because there is a wide travel distance for our young people travelling to some of the special needs schools.

I want to use this opportunity to wish all the young people who were, thankfully, not seriously injured in the crash this morning near Downpatrick, all the best. I understand from the latest reports that the majority of the young people are OK. The driver is shook up but, thankfully, no one was seriously injured in that accident. I wish them all the best.

No one has been left behind in area planning. I have made investments, and I want to ensure that the next piece of work that we do is more focused and more strategic.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his update, and I welcome the fact that there has been a large number of respondents to the consultation. It is clear that those voices need to be heard.

In his statement, the Minister said:

"There was a call for more innovative ideas and a willingness to explore more cross-sectoral solutions."

He also said:

"My Department has assessed the draft area plans against the terms of reference and guidance. Although the plans do not totally meet the terms of reference that I set out, in some areas, they contain sound proposals. I regard them as the foundation on which to move forward."

Does the Minister agree that the reference to looking at cross-border solutions has not been adhered to and that much more work needs to be done by the managing authorities to assess the opportunities that lie in our education sector

there? Will he outline to the House how those opportunities can be delivered, particularly in places with particular needs such as rural County Fermanagh?

Mr O'Dowd: I agree with the Member. I do not believe that the cross-border element of the terms of reference has been fully achieved. There remains potential for cross-border planning of our schools estate to benefit people on both sides of the border. I want the steering group to look at that as a specific piece of work. We continue to have discussions at the North/South Ministerial Council with Minister Ruairí Quinn on those matters to see how we can move that process forward.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. As he is very much aware, there is a strong lobby for new schools in the Holywood area. I see that there are proposals for further discussions on the corridor between the South Eastern Education and Library Board and the Belfast Education and Library Board areas. Will the Holywood newbuilds be included in those discussions?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes; in general, I see the Holywood newbuilds being part of those discussions. I will meet you and a delegation from Holywood in a number of weeks' time to further discuss those matters.

As I said previously to you and to representatives of the schools, we need a firm decision in that area, so that I, as Minister, can make a proposal on the way forward. I need decisions in the local area and a confirmed area plan for the area, which has to take into account the flow into Belfast and vice versa. There is a bit more work to be done in that regard, but I look forward to the discussions with you and representatives from the area, which will assist us in moving forward towards an agreed pathway for the Holywood area.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he referred to the post-primary sector in Fermanagh. Where does the responsibility for the proposals lie and who will make the final decisions on their progress? Does it lie with the Department, the Western Education and Library Board or the schools' boards of governors?

Mr O'Dowd: That depends on the sector. If you are referring to the controlled sector, I can say that the decisions will rest with the relevant education and library board. Decisions for the maintained sector will rest with the maintained sector. Those bodies will have to be included in

the discussions on the way forward for the area planning process. That will be the deciding factor in signing off on area plans.

I made an announcement about the controlled sector in Fermanagh. I made that decision on the basis of proposals that were brought forward by the Western Education and Library Board. I agreed that those proposals were the best way forward for the controlled sector in the Fermanagh area, and they are progressing through planning.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the announcement of a new school build at Glenwood Primary School in my constituency.

The Minister mentioned west Belfast in his statement but the problems that he acknowledged apply equally in north Belfast. There are major socio-economic problems right across the constituency. Will he take urban constituencies such as North Belfast into consideration and will his steering group, when it reports to him, consider working with groups such as Integrated Services for Children and Young People in the greater Shankill area to get a viable solution to the problems that face many young people across the constituency?

Mr O'Dowd: You are right. I emphasised west Belfast in my statement as an example of where decisions need to be made. Those decisions can be brought together more easily in urban areas than in rural communities, where there are longer travelling distances etc. However, we have instances in west Belfast — I will come to north Belfast in a second — of schools looking at each other across the roads and of schools on the one site divided by a fence. To me, not much area planning is required to bring a resolution to that issue.

11.45 am

I agree with the Member about North Belfast. I have received representations from representatives of North Belfast and the Shankill area about how we should move forward on the educational attainment of the young people in that area. That will take community involvement and the involvement of the education board and the Department. I am happy to play my part in all that as well. I am more than happy for the voices of the representative bodies in that area, which the Member referred to, to be heard as part of an area-planning process. Indeed, they need to be heard as part of that process.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. In the statement, he made reference to a number of plans in particular board areas. However, he did not mention the North Eastern Education and Library Board, which is a board that has progressed with more specific proposals than others. I imagine that the Minister has received a huge response to the proposals for schools in the Magherafelt area. Will he give us an insight into his thoughts on the way forward in the Magherafelt area? Does he recognise that there has been a lack of engagement that is resulting in increased anxiety in schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The danger of using examples in a speech is that you may leave others out. My speech was between 15 and 20 minutes long, and I thought that it was long enough. If I left board areas out, it does not mean that they do not have good examples. I recognise the work on area planning that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has conducted. Indeed, some of the capital announcements that I made previously were as a result of the work that the North Eastern Education and Library Board conducted.

I am not going to give my views on the Magherafelt area, because continuing work is required on that. However, I will encourage the Member, as an elected representative of the area, to ensure that the decision process moves forward and that she uses her influence. Decisions need to be made in the Magherafelt area, particularly on the controlled sector and what provision will look like in the future. It is an area that the steering group will have to look at. As I said, it is one of those areas in which I want decisions to be made. There is still work to be done there, but it does not need to be protracted or long ended. People need to make decisions; that is the key to success. It is not up to me to tell that local area from afar what the solution is. It needs to come together, make the decision and present the rationale for that decision to me, as Minister.

Mr Allister: The Minister is on record saying that, although area planning itself does not have a stated purpose of ending academic selection, it will contribute to changing the educational landscape in such a way as to make academic selection more irrelevant. Will the Minister, therefore, tell the House frankly how important a tool area planning is to him in liquidating academic selection? Is that his real driver in area planning? Will he be frank and candid with the House about that?

Mr O'Dowd: I thought that I was frank and candid with Mr McCrea when he asked me a similar question. I am on record saying that, if I believed that legislation for a phased removal of academic selection, which my predecessor, Caitríona Ruane, promoted, would pass through the Assembly, I would bring it to the Assembly. However, I know that we will not achieve consensus on that.

Is area planning the key to removing academic selection? No, it is not. However, I believe that the more that people discuss education and the more that educational partners in the one area come together, the more irrelevant academic selection becomes. You can then provide excellent education across a range of schools, or in one school, without the need for selecting and rejecting children at 11 years of age. I do not distance myself at all from the remarks that you attributed to me. I assure the Member that area planning is not some sort of clandestine method for me to remove academic selection. However, I believe that its outcomes, the discussions with educationalists and the realisation that you do not need academic selection for educational excellence will come to reality.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling the next Member, I will say that there is too much noise coming from the Benches. Please take private conversations outside. I call Mr Mervyn Storey.

Mr Storey: In his statement, the Minister refers to sectors, as other Members have done this morning. Will the Minister tell the House when CCMS will be brought into the tent or told to stay outside it? Quite clearly, the controlled sector has had enough.

Today, the Minister announced that, in March, he will progress with the area plans for primary schools. In the past 10 years, 50 controlled primary schools have closed, of which 19 were maintained schools. Ten controlled secondary schools have closed, of which three were maintained schools. No voluntary grammars have closed.

I say to the Minister and the House today that the purge on the controlled sector must come to an end. As the DUP spokesperson, I make it clear that that will have to be the case.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please ask a question?

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give the House a clear indication and an assurance that CCMS's

cavalier attitude to area planning will come to an end?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not recognise the claim that CCMS has a cavalier attitude to area planning. It is in the tent. If you want to ensure that your facilities and estate are upgraded or replaced, you have to be involved in area planning. If you are not there, I am not building. It is as simple as that.

To talk about the number of school closures is to have the wrong debate. If the Member can point me to any schools that I have closed in my tenure that I should have kept open, that is the debate that we should be having. If a school can no longer provide the education necessary to facilitate the curriculum and the achievement of first-class, world-class education systems, I am of the view that it should be closed. That is the harsh reality. For a public representative to say that a facility should be closed may be a difficult concept to grasp, but if it is the wrong facility in the wrong place, it should be closed. I do not buy into the numbers game that there have been 50 closures here and none there.

One of the methods used for primary schools and, indeed, post-primary schools by the maintained sector has been to amalgamate schools. The Department does not necessarily register the amalgamation of primary schools and of post-primary schools as a closure, although it is, in effect, the closure of one of the schools when they amalgamate on one site.

I will not play the numbers game that says that if I have to close a controlled school, I will look for a maintained school and an integrated school to close. I may be tempted to look for a voluntary grammar school, but that is a different story.

The Member makes a serious point: the voluntary grammar sector will have to include itself. I refer to Mr Morrow's comment, and we will see how we facilitate it in the discussions. Whether it be the non-selective sector in the maintained sector or the controlled sector, it should not be taking all the hits. It is everybody's responsibility to ensure that we have a sustainable schools estate.

Miss M McIlveen: On reading the statement, I was curious about the piece of work that the Minister is commissioning on the number of pupils travelling from the South Eastern Board area to Belfast and, in particular, how that may limit the parental choice of my constituents. Having listened to his response to Mr Hazzard, I am speechless, and that does not happen

very often. The Minister is suggesting that well-established schools in Belfast may be in the wrong location. Is the Minister telling the House that he is planning to move those schools and, if so, at what cost?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not know why the Member is speechless, considering that the population flows out of Belfast, and so on. Over the years, it has been decided that well-established hospitals in Belfast were in the wrong place. The fact that a school has existed in point A for a number of years does not mean that it has to continue to exist on that spot. That is particularly the case if it is drawing pupils from a geographical area beyond Belfast. Why are we congesting our roads by driving pupils to school and why are we spending hundreds of thousands — perhaps millions — of pounds busing children to schools in Belfast when those schools could be built at another location that is more accessible to the draw of pupils?

However, I have no answer to any of those questions. I said in my statement that I am commissioning work that will have to include the schools that already exist in Belfast — the well-established schools that the Member refers to. Their views will have to be taken on the matter. I cannot tell the voluntary grammar schools where to place themselves. I cannot tell them where to be rebuilt. However, we have can have a conversation with them about where the best place is for them to exist in the future.

Some of the schools have already asked themselves this question: where do we see ourselves geographically 10, 15 and 20 years down the line, serving education? They are already asking themselves that question. This piece of work will be valuable, not only to the Department but to those schools as well.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. Tuigim go bhfuil an plean ceantair do dheisceart Ard Mhacha socraithe cheana féin. D'ardaigh mé cheana féin leis an Aire an gá atá le hinfheistíocht a dhéanamh i scoil Naomh Iosaf i gCros Mhic Linnáin.

I thank the Minister for his statement. I understand that the area plan for south Armagh is well settled, and I have already raised with the Minister the need for investment in St Joseph's High School in Crossmaglen.

There is little reference in the Minister's statement to progress being made in many areas of the region, outside of two or three.

Four years after the 'Together Towards Entitlement' report was published, is he confident that the steering group that he will establish will move the process on at any greater rate? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as a cheist. I announced that I would be bringing forward the area planning process in September 2011. The group first got together in February 2012, so the work has been going on for about a year in real terms. At times, progress has been slower than I would have wished it to be and it has been frustrating. However, there has been progress.

This is not the best way to plan going into the future: we are dealing with five education and library boards, CCMS, the Irish-medium sector, the integrated sector and the voluntary sector. I hope that I have not left anybody out of that list. So, we have to get all of those people to work together and, for the first time in their collective histories, agree an area plan. Underneath that, you have 1,100 schools, all of which have an opinion about themselves — and rightly so — and believe that they should be the core school in their area and be maintained at all costs. So, you have to deal with all that and try to develop a plan.

So, we have made progress. I mentioned to one of the other Members that I have listed, as an example, areas of progress in some of the board areas. There are other areas that I can list as examples, but the overall picture has been that more work needs to be done on area planning.

Will the steering group move that forward? Yes, it will. The steering group will move it forward until the establishment of ESA, and then ESA will take responsibility for area planning. Area planning is going to be a continuous process of moving towards a sustainable schools estate.

On the issue of different versions of the plans and moving forward, there may be a couple of years' more work in this. However, at each stage, you will be able to examine the plans and make definitive statements about certain areas. I have done that: if you look at my capital builds announcement, I used area planning as the tool for deciding where new capital builds would be. As area plans move forward again, and when there is more money available for capital investment, we will look at them to see where capital investment should be. In terms of the school enhancement programme, which I recently announced, area

planning will be the tool used to decide where that money should be spent as well.

So, it is an ongoing piece of work. As with many things in this society, things do not always move as quickly as they could.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement. In reference to the educational campus in Omagh, can the Minister state whether the area-planning template matches the terms of reference of the Department? Can he assure us that all of the schools are positively engaged? What is the timescale for the consummation and development of the project?

Mr O'Dowd: I confirmed this morning that the area planning solution for Omagh is Lisanelly, and that my future investments in the Omagh area will be in the Lisanelly site. As I mentioned to you during the Adjournment debate a number of nights ago, there has been a very democratic system. There has been local consultation, the council in the area has debated this and supports the Lisanelly project, the local representatives in the area support it, the Assembly supports it and it is a Programme for Government target that I intend to achieve. So, it is one of those areas where there has been enough discussion: it is now time to move forward. As I said to you in the debate the other night, I am looking at a variety of ways to fund that project, and a number of international partners may be willing to provide some funding towards it.

All those aspects are going forward. I confirmed this morning that the decision on area planning for Omagh has been made: Lisanelly is the only show in town.

12.00 noon

Executive Committee Business

Companies (Public Sector Audit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

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

That the draft Companies (Public Sector Audit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

I will briefly set out the background to the draft order. The proposed legislation is necessary to update the list of not-for-profit public bodies that are subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG). Since 2008, when the original legislation was made, a number of new not-for-profit companies have been created, and some companies that were previously listed have been dissolved or transferred out of public sector ownership. Hence, there is a need to revise the list of bodies to take account of those changes.

The new legislation will permit the Comptroller and Auditor General to report on as well as certify the accounts of the relevant bodies, providing scope for him to comment more widely on matters pertaining to the bodies in question. That ties into the general legislative framework for other audits and provides for stronger accountability. I commend the order to the House.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister set out, this is a straightforward piece of legislation. The purpose of the order is to amend the list of not-for-profit public companies to be subject to annual audit by the C&AG from that set out in the Companies (Public Sector Audit) Order 2008. The proposal noted that the opportunity is also being taken to enable the C&AG to report on as well as certify the accounts of the bodies to be subject to that legislation. It stated that that is in line with the general legislative framework for other audits and will provide greater capacity for the C&AG to issue a report without necessarily qualifying or modifying his or her audit opinion.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The Committee agreed at its meeting that it had no objection to the policy proposals. The formal

statutory rule before the Assembly was considered by the Committee together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules, and the Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. The Committee, therefore, agreed to recommend that the draft order be approved by the Assembly.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat. I support the proposal.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Chairman and the Deputy Chairman for keeping their remarks as brief as mine. It means that we can move on quickly from this business.

I thank the Committee for its work on the legislation. As I said to the House, the order is necessary because the list of bodies to be audited has changed over time. Some have been added, and some have been taken off. It gives additional powers. Someone asked me whether this means that the Northern Ireland Audit Office will get additional resources. The answer is "No. It will not get additional resources". However, I understand that the Audit Office is content that the additional work can be done within the existing generous budget that we already make available to that body. I commend the order to the Assembly and trust that it will have Members' support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Companies (Public Sector Audit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Ad Hoc Committee: Parliament Buildings

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 in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. As a valid petition of concern was presented on Monday 25 February in relation to the motion, the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

Ms Ruane: I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with issues surrounding flags, emblems, symbols and language at Parliament Buildings and to report to the Assembly.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I want to read a few quotes from the Good Friday Agreement:

"We, the participants in the multi-party negotiations, believe that the agreement we have negotiated offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning."

"Táimid tiomanta don chomhpháirtíocht, don chomhionannas agus don chomhurráim mar bhonn leis na caidrimh laistigh de Thuaisceart Éireann, idir an Tuaisceart agus an Deisceart, agus idir na hoileáin seo".

"We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships within [the North of Ireland], between North and South, and between these islands ... We acknowledge the substantial differences between our continuing, and equally legitimate, political aspirations ... affirm that whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of [the North], the power of the sovereign government with jurisdiction there shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality on behalf of all the people in the diversity of their identities and traditions and shall be founded on the principles of full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights, of freedom from discrimination for all citizens, and of parity of

esteem and of just and equal treatment for the identity, ethos, and aspirations of both communities ... recognise the birthright of all the people of [the North] to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of [the North] ... All participants recognise the importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity, including in [the North], the Irish language, Ulster-Scots and the languages of the various ethnic communities, all of which are part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland ... All participants acknowledge the sensitivity of the use of symbols and emblems for public purposes, and the need in particular in creating the new institutions to ensure that such symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division."

Tagann na hailt seo ó Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta, agus tá roinnt mhaith eile cosúil leo. Ritheann an teanga chéana tríd: urraim, cearta, caoinfhuilíngt, comhionannas, éagsúlacht, Éireannach, Briotanach. An bhfuil an réaltacht ag cur leis na focail? These are some of the quotes from the Good Friday Agreement. The language running through it is "respect", "rights", "tolerance", "equality", "diversity", "Irish" and "British". Does the reality match the words?

We have watched the hysterical reaction to the democratic decision of Belfast City Council, a compromise position in relation to the flag that does not afford equality to nationalists and republicans. Indeed, it is a mirror image of what happens in other councils, for which Members of the House voted in their capacity as councillors. We have listened to the weak excuses as the PSNI has failed to police illegal parades and illegal roadblocks and the intimidation of elected representatives. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: We have watched as a significant number of Members joined those illegal roadblocks. Thankfully, because of public pressure from beleaguered businesses and civic society, they have come off that — not before time. We have witnessed the failure of leadership from many on the Benches opposite over the past few months. One example of that failure of leadership was the motion put forward by the DUP to the Assembly Commission. It is

a Commission that claims that it operates on consensus, it has a unionist majority, and, on June 2, 2002:

"The Commission agreed that the flags issue is a political issue best handled by the Assembly."

Putting forward this motion is a political stunt by the DUP. The DUP, before Christmas, was calling for a forum to discuss the issue of flags and identity. Today, it has tabled a petition of concern to block the establishment of such a forum. It seems to me that both unionist parties are letting themselves be led by illegal, antidemocratic protesters like Bryson and Frazer, instead of trying to come at the issue in a sensible, mature way. This is 2013, not 1913.

Is é an cur chuige daonlathach plé agus vóta a dhéanamh sa Tionól, ach feictear go bhfuil eagla ar an DUP agus ar an UUP — agus níl a lán den UUP anseo — roimh dhíospóireacht sa Tionól.

The democratic approach would be for the discussion and vote to take place in the Assembly, but the DUP and UUP are afraid, it would appear, to have the debate in the Assembly. Who is afraid of democracy? Why would anyone be afraid of the establishment of an ad hoc group to deal with issues surrounding flags, emblems, symbols and language at Parliament Buildings and to report to the Assembly? As Assembly Members, we have a duty of care —

Lord Morrow: I thank the Member for giving way. She goes on at great length to elaborate on the cowardice of the DUP and the Ulster Unionists on the issue. Would she like to tell the House why her party and her colleagues in the SDLP have consistently boycotted the Commission meetings? Would you like to elaborate on that?

Ms Ruane: I thank the Member for his comment. First, I say to him that his party should have no fear of democracy and equality. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: The place for discussion of flags, symbols and emblems is the Chamber, not the Assembly Commission. The UUP knows that, and where are its members today? Where are they in defence of their wonderful democratic position? Where are they? I see a lone presence in the Chamber. The least they could do is to come out and defend their

undemocratic position in relation to this. Even at this stage, I call on the parties opposite to support the setting up of an Ad Hoc Committee, to look at the principles that I read out from this agreement. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: They are basic, fundamental principles. Who is afraid of democracy? Why should anyone be afraid of the establishment of an ad hoc group?

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ruane: I will, yes.

Mr Storey: The Member asks, "Who is afraid of democracy?". If the party opposite is so keen on democracy, will she tell this House why it absents itself from the Mother of Parliaments at Westminster? It takes salaries, money and all the benefits, but it does not go to the most democratic forum in the United Kingdom.

Ms Ruane: That is a typical deflection tactic from Mr Storey. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Storey: Answer.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: I will not deign to give an answer to that deflection. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Ms Ruane: Let us talk about the issues here, in this part of Ireland. Let us talk about the agreement. Let us talk about the agreements that we have reached as political parties. Let us talk —

Mr Storey: We did not sign up to that —

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: See this nonsense that "We have not signed up to the Good Friday Agreement"? It is another pretence to their electorate. You signed up to power sharing, North/South, the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

Ms Ruane: So, let us not pretend that you do not support these institutions. The difficulty is that you want to cherry-pick what you do in these institutions.

I say to the Members opposite that, as Assembly Members, we have a duty of care to employees in this Building and, to date, the Assembly Commission has failed in that duty. Some of the staff in this Building have come to me saying that they feel that their traditions and identity have not been respected and they do not work in a neutral environment — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: — and they feel discriminated against.

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you allow a situation where a Member refers to members of staff in this House? I ask the Speaker to rule on this issue. I ask the Member to withdraw the remark, which is scurrilous. It is a very dangerous position for any Member to place members of staff in.

Mr Speaker: On the point of order, there is a mechanism outside the Chamber if staff have a problem with the Building. I advise Members to be careful and caution them against drawing staff into a political situation. I warn all Members of the House to be very careful in what they say. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms Ruane: I think it is very important that, in our duty of care, we ensure that all members of staff work in a neutral environment or an equal environment. The current environment is not neutral, and it is not equal. Their views need to be listened to and acted on. It is very important that all traditions are respected in the House and in the Building. Do I and the people who voted for me feel that our identity is cherished, that we have parity of esteem and that our ethos and identity are respected?

12.15 pm

Mr Storey: National insurance number?

Ms Ruane: Even as I ask the question, I am being interrupted rudely. We come up Prince of Wales Avenue; we come past Carson's statue; we come in under Britannia's lions — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: Poppies are sold at every entrance during November, yet our national flag is not flown and our Irish language is not given the place that it deserves. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: Our symbols, such as the Easter lily, are not given parity of esteem.

Mr Storey: War symbols.

Ms Ruane: You see, there is more rudeness from across the Chamber. There is more rudeness, because they do not want to listen to the message.

Mr Clarke: I do not want to listen to you.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: Well, there you go. I will ask the Speaker to rule on that. It is my right to speak here, and if you do not want to listen to me —

Mr Speaker: Order. Members need to be mindful of their language in the Chamber. It is a democratic institution. I should not have to remind Members where they are. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I respect the right of people in the unionist community to have their heroes, symbols and emblems, but I expect that respect to be reciprocated.

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

Ms Ruane: The days of forcing one flag on everyone are well and truly over. When are they going to stop ignoring people's views? I urge all parties to vote for this proposal. Who is afraid of democracy? Sinn Féin is not. Bring it on.

Mr Campbell: The issue of establishing or not establishing an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with the issues that the Member mentioned needs to be looked at in the context of where we are. The Sinn Féin Member for South Down said that these issues should be dealt with in the Chamber, yet the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee would not mean that they are dealt with in the Chamber; they would be dealt with in the way in which other issues are dealt with in Ad Hoc Committees — outside the Chamber. However, let us come to the central core of —

Ms Ruane: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I will.

Ms Ruane: Actually, it would be dealt with in the Chamber. In the first instance, it would be dealt with by all parties sitting round a table in an Ad Hoc Committee, and a full report would then be brought to the Chamber.

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

Mr Campbell: Getting an extra minute is at least some good from the intervention, Mr Speaker.

So, as she has just confirmed, the Ad Hoc Committee would meet outside the Chamber, which negates what she said. That is almost pedantry. Let us get down to the core of the issue. It is really not conducive to good debate for the Member or anyone else to wave redundant documents from 15 years ago. That really is not conducive to where we are now and to the progress that we need to make for the future. We need to establish —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: Yes, everybody is looking to get in.

Mr Lyttle: I ask the Member sincerely to reflect on the comment about the Good Friday Agreement being redundant, given the huge democratic support that was given to that agreement across the whole island of Ireland.

Mr Campbell: The Member should have listened to what I was going to say. If we are talking about the underlying principles of integrity and respect and about some of the other issues that cover a range of documents, there is not an issue. The issue is the way in which that document was implemented over our heads and how it brought into a democratic forum those who advocated violence. That is the point that I was making. That issue is redundant, dealt with and, hopefully, will never come back again.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way.

Mr Campbell: Yes, I will.

Mr Eastwood: The Member talks again about a redundant document. DUP Members have shouted from their seats about the fact that the

DUP did not support the Good Friday Agreement. Will the Member not accept here and now that the people of Ireland — North and South — voted overwhelmingly for the Good Friday Agreement?

Mr Campbell: I am glad that the Member put it like that. The people of the Irish Republic, in that country, voted overwhelmingly in favour of the Belfast Agreement. Undoubtedly, that is the case. The position in Northern Ireland was completely different. Yes, there was a majority — 15 years ago. I do not know why people are obsessed with what happened 15 years ago. We are more interested in what happens today, tomorrow, next week, next month and next year. The position is that —

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: No, I am running out of time to give way. It is not like me to be generous, but I have been very generous. I am not going to be any more.

The factual position in law is that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. I know that the Member for South Down does not like that and does not want that, but she has to accept that. That is the reality. It does not matter how many Ad Hoc Committees she wants established or how many votes she wants, because that is the reality. It is not going to change next week, next month, next year or any time in the future.

A reflection of that reality is that the flag of the United Kingdom flies in the Parliament of the United Kingdom in London. Some people referred to what happens in the Irish Parliament, and many Members talked about a document from 15 years ago. The flag of that country flies on that Parliament in Dublin regularly throughout the year, so, if the honourable Member for South Down wants parity of esteem for flags, I await the introduction in that Parliament with her colleagues of the dual flags of the union flag and the tricolour flying on Dáil Éireann. I have not heard anybody say that that would be a contribution towards Britishness and Irishness and the recognition of both identities. Nobody says that. Why? Because the process that the Member for South Down and some of her colleagues seem to be engaged in is a one-way process. In Northern Ireland, they want recognition of dual identities, but, in the Republic, it is a solo identity. I do not know why I am regarded as being hard line when I say that. That is the factual position, and the honourable Member cannot seem to accept it.

The Member for South Down referred to rights and responsibilities and to issues that flow from the integrity of these institutions. For once, in one small part of what she said, I agree with her. We also need to establish that, when it comes to the rights and responsibilities —

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

Mr Campbell: — of others in the context of what we do here, everybody has to accept that a petition of concern has been tabled.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Campbell: We have stated where we stand, and we move on beyond this redundant piece of legislation.

Mr Cree: It is certainly heating up. It looks as though it will be a very interesting afternoon.

Flags, emblems, symbols and language are always emotive and sensitive issues in Northern Ireland. That is particularly the case in the current, often volatile situation that we have seen on the streets over the past number of months. We have seen the difficulty that the decision at Belfast City Council has caused, and I ask that the Assembly do not make the same mistake. The necessary consensus in all the issues must be sought and agreed before changes are made. This debate should be carried out with that in mind, and we in this House should set an example.

The Assembly Commission currently has clear responsibilities under section 40 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. That includes providing the Assembly with the property, staff and services required for the Assembly's purposes. During my time on the Commission, that role has included looking at issues such as flags, emblems, symbols and language in the context of our work in promoting equality of opportunity and the desirability of good relations.

I will just correct the proposer of the motion. The Commission comprises five members, and no one in the House would contend that the Alliance Party is a unionist party. The Commission is the proper place for this subject to be discussed. For that reason, I and my party are opposed to the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee. Why do we need a new way of dealing with these areas when we already have an appropriate mechanism? One must assume that the underlying reason for this motion is the ongoing flags issue. Certainly, the discussion so far supports that.

The Commission has attempted to meet on a number of occasions recently to progress this matter, with the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party, on two occasions, boycotting the meetings. If those parties are not prepared to discuss the issues within the context of Commission meetings, why should we expect any progress on an Ad Hoc Committee?

The situation with the flying of the Union flag at Stormont is straightforward: we do not have a designated day list that is consistent. For example, it appears that Belfast City Hall goes with the designated day list published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in London, which offers 18 designated days for Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: Is the Member stating clearly today, therefore, that the Ulster Unionist Party is holding to its long-standing position of supporting designated days at Parliament Buildings at Stormont?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Cree: Thank you for that. You will have to wait for the answer.

Parliament Buildings at Stormont is governed by the list in the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 2000. That has 17 days, but, with the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother and the Princess Margaret, we are now down to 15 days. It is the wish of my party, through the Commission, to look at how that anomaly can be rectified, because it is entirely inappropriate that the number of days is left to dwindle, as is happening.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: No.

A suggestion may be that the list used at Parliament Buildings is tied to the list used by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, or we can look at a Northern Ireland-specific approach. There is no reason why the Commission cannot deal with this. Indeed, a consultation is being drawn up along those lines.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: No.

I reiterate that my party is seeking to effect change that is fair through reaching a consensus. That is why it is so disappointing that others are not willing to participate through the usual forum. We are not seeking to push through a decision using a majority, as happened on Belfast City Council. We are also not seeking to go on a solo run, as David Ford attempted to do in the Justice Department with the stripping of the emblems of the Northern Ireland Prison Service. We are simply looking to consult on the best and fairest way forward.

As I said, my party is not willing to agree to the setting up of an Ad Hoc Committee of this nature. It is time-consuming and inappropriate, and the mechanism is already in place for discussion and debate. It is disappointing that, while the economy is still struggling and unemployment remains high, we are devoting so much time to flags and emblems.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Cree: No. Important and emotive as flags and emblems are, I think that the majority of people in Northern Ireland would rather that we found solutions to job creation, educational underachievement and housing issues.

Mr P Ramsey: I support the motion. For many weeks now, protests have been held across Northern Ireland about the flying of the Union flag at Belfast City Hall. The depth of feeling across the community about the issue shows that we have still not dealt sufficiently with the flags, symbols and emblems of the respective identities of so many people in Northern Ireland. To that end, as the SDLP member of the Assembly Commission, I welcome the motion to the House, which is the appropriate place to discuss the motion.

We are all here to lead, and this is what leading does, through the setting up of this ad hoc group — not just looking singly at flags but looking at emblems, symbols and a language strategy. A mature discussion by all should take place in the Chamber. That is how we demonstrate to those in the community and the outside world that the Assembly does not shy away from the difficult decisions and that we are capable of maintaining political recognition of the sensitive issues around flags, emblems and symbols.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. Clearly, the Member is talking about consensus, and I am sure we will move on to that. We have heard much about consensus in the Chamber. Very clearly, on Belfast City

Council — I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council — there was no consensus on the flag. However, a majority of people in that chamber decided to drive through the policy. Your party clearly supports that majority in City Hall, but there is a consensus in the electorate to send a unionist majority here. You simply will not recognise the majority that resides here. I say to the Member, with the greatest respect, that in the City Hall vote your party voted in committee to remove the flag entirely, then shifted its position, led by Sinn Féin, to have designated days.

12.30 pm

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for the intervention. The original motion that was tabled to the Assembly Commission is clearly watered down now. The predetermined outcome that was originally in the motion has been taken out. I maintain the case that it was the DUP, the Ulster Unionists and the Alliance Party that, on the original Assembly Commission, decided on the designated days. Go back to 2001. It was those same parties that, in 2001, decided on the setting up of an ad hoc group to look at flags, symbols and emblems. There is no difference between then and now. That is the best place to bring forward ideas and thoughts, and, reflecting on what Lesley Cree said, to bring about consensus. There was never going to be consensus on the original motion that was tabled by the DUP and the Ulster Unionists, because it was seen as trick and stunt politics. Those trick and stunt politics failed.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate that the Member was not here 10 years or so ago, but he should be aware that the setting up of an Ad Hoc Committee was in a period when this was, essentially, a Secretary of State matter. Indeed, where it was a reserved or excepted matter, the format was that an Ad Hoc Committee would be set up, as was done for a number of other issues, such as criminal damage compensation. That is why an Ad Hoc Committee was established at that point to look at the issue of flags, not within Parliament Buildings but across all of Northern Ireland.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for the intervention. It was also the case that the DUP accepted the Northern Ireland order from the then Secretary of State on the designated days. That is what it accepted at the Assembly Commission. Then, when the tensions on the

street were very high, the DUP tried to pull a stunt over the other parties in the House. That was not going to happen. The SDLP was certainly not going to be part of that.

Getting back to the motion, Mr Speaker, I stress that the proposal is not a threat to any party in the Assembly. It is an opportunity to positively and constructively address issues around emblems, flags and symbols and should be seen as such. Let me make it clear that there is no appetite in the SDLP for any point scoring on the issue. There is no appetite for that. However, we all have a job to do on behalf of the public. If passed, the motion would give us a chance to speak candidly in Committee — a much calmer environment — about our views on these matters. That is not what is happening with some Members, who really are stretching it to the limits.

I remind Members that the Commission carried out an internal good relations audit in line with its section 75 responsibilities in conjunction with Holywell Consultancy. Holywell Consultancy examined various documents, including the Assembly's corporate plan, the engagement strategy, the good relations action plan, the secretariat staff survey, the dignity at work policy and the Assembly equality scheme. I want to highlight some of the areas where we have fundamentally not been able to achieve consensus, but we are prepared, as reasonable politicians and in representing our parties on the Assembly Commission, to get to a consensus. The difference here is that two parties were trying to force through a situation. It is not and never has been the practice or policy of the Assembly Commission for any party or joint party motion to be tabled. That is what our concern was. The parties need to reflect on what they did prior to Christmas. It was done to the fiddle of those outside who were calling the tune.

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

Mr P Ramsey: I appeal to Members. I know that there is a petition of concern to guillotine the motion. However, this is an important subject, and the only way we can deal with it is through an ad hoc group.

Mrs Cochrane: I support the motion. I want to first address why the motion is before us. As was already mentioned, back in December, the unionist parties used a mechanism to bring a motion to the Assembly Commission. At that time, I made it clear that I was not prepared to discuss the matter during constant violence and

intimidation. There are those who have said that by doing so I was boycotting the Commission meeting. However, I believe it was a principled stand that gave those proposing the motion the time to reflect on their role as Commission members, allowed some of the heat to go out of the situation and prevented us from making a knee-jerk reaction.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: No, I am not going to give way at the minute.

In the background, however, I met other Commission members to see if we could get consensus on the manner in which flags could be discussed in a formally constituted Commission meeting. I reminded my fellow Commission members that our role is to serve the Assembly and not individual parties and that, when making decisions, we should have due regard for equality. I also reminded them that, in June 2000, the Commission had agreed that the flag issue was a political matter best handled by the Assembly and that the Commission would operate to the existing regulations and take its direction from the Assembly.

There is an option for Members to bring a motion forward, and, although I do not agree with the DUP and UUP's motivation for doing that, they brought it forward, and they were operating in line with Commission procedures. Also, as the Commission's remit includes responsibility for good relations in this Building, regardless of whether some feel that flags and emblems are a matter best dealt with by the Assembly, the reality is that the corporate body has a role to play in this. I feel strongly that the matter will not be resolved satisfactorily without due regard for equality. Therefore, I was not willing to support the original motion. However, I showed leadership by trying to bring forward a revised motion that could be acceptable to all. Let us be clear: by agreeing to the new motion, the DUP and UUP have moved substantially from their original position in four ways. First, we are now asking for a report, not a consultation; secondly, there is no longer a predetermined outcome; thirdly, an equality impact assessment is now included; and, fourthly, the assumption that the Commission is the only place for the final decision to be taken has been removed. That is what consensus politics is about. The Speaker also sought to have all Commission members present in order to formally agree how wide-ranging such a report might be. Unfortunately, however, some members still felt unable to participate in the discussion.

Here we are today with a motion to establish an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with issues surrounding flags, emblems, symbols and language at Parliament Buildings and to report to the Assembly. Parliament Buildings hosts a large number of events and visitors each year and has a significant opportunity to play a leading role in the encouragement of dialogue, shared learning and mutual respect for different faiths and cultural backgrounds. The Stormont building and its history represent challenges that require careful presentation, and I believe that those challenges can be met through attention to detail and sensitive negotiation. The Good Friday Agreement was endorsed by the majority of people, and, regardless of whether some think it is redundant, the fact remains that those who signed up to the agreement and those who have taken office in the new institutions have a duty to ensure that such issues are dealt with sensitively and with an outcome that is balanced for everyone.

The existence of an Ad Hoc Committee and the work proposed for the Commission are not mutually exclusive. One might even inform the other. Therefore, I am content to support the motion. There is a need for mature debate.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Cochrane: No, I will not give way, thank you. There is a need for mature debate around these contentious issues — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

Mrs Cochrane: We need to balance the role of the Commission, members of which are to act with integrity, including political impartiality, with the party political views of Members, which could be expressed via the Ad Hoc Committee. We should see the motion not as a threat but as an opportunity to look at issues that will allow the Northern Ireland Assembly to be reflected as an Assembly for everyone. We have an opportunity to show leadership in addressing difficult and challenging good relations issues, and we should take it today.

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

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.38 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 1 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer. Question 6 has been transferred to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for written answer. Mr Roy Beggs is not in his place to ask question 2.

Net Fiscal Balance Report

3. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the purpose of the net fiscal balance report by his Department and how it is used. (AQO 3487/11-15)

5. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the purpose of the estimate on VAT produced by his officials for publication in the net fiscal balance report. (AQO 3489/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to take questions 3 and 5 together.

The purpose of the latest net fiscal balance report is to provide a broad overview of public sector finances in Northern Ireland for the financial years 2006-07 to 2010-11. As Members will be aware, the report provides an estimate of our overall net fiscal balance position, or fiscal deficit, which is, essentially, the difference between government expenditure and revenue raised locally. In that regard, the VAT estimate is merely one element. I remind Members again that, as the report indicates, it is not intended to provide an accurate estimate of individual revenue items such as VAT, which has been estimated in the absence of actual regional data.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will know that income tax, VAT and corporation tax make up an estimated half of the North's revenue. That is based on two surveys. There are question marks over where the headquarters of particular companies here are based, which affects the figures for corporation tax. Those figures have, potentially, been underestimated.

Does he agree that the estimates are insufficient for the Executive and that there is a need for him and the Executive to put pressure on the Treasury to release more accurate figures, which, of course, it has?

Mr Wilson: We do not, in all cases, have the exact figures for revenue that is collected here in Northern Ireland. That is not only true for Northern Ireland, but for other devolved Administrations. One thing that I would say, however, is that the methods that are used are accepted under the codes for collecting official statistics and are recognised by the Office for National Statistics. Secondly, of course, the Scottish Government have accepted that the methods that are used for Scotland, which we mimic here in Northern Ireland, are acceptable ways of calculating estimates.

Let us bear in mind that, in gathering many official figures, initially, estimates have to be made. Take, for example, the balance of payments figures for the United Kingdom, which tend to be estimates. Indeed, sometimes revisions are made as a result of more information becoming available later on.

The Member mentioned corporation tax. He mentioned one of the things that was not initially included. One of the reasons why we extended discussions with the Treasury was exactly to drill down and to try to get information on those figures. I am happy that, where there is dispute, there is a mechanism in place for dealing with that and for getting more accurate figures in the longer run.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Mitchel McLaughlin is not in his place to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for explaining the net fiscal balance. Does the Minister have a strategy for reducing the fiscal deficit? What would be in that strategy?

Mr Wilson: We do not want to be reliant on subsidies from central Government because, of course, when fiscal decisions are made at that level, it leaves the Northern Ireland economy a victim to changes. What is the Executive's policy on that? What do we seek to do? The reason why we have given primacy to growing the economy, especially the private sector, is to reduce our dependence on the transfer of funds from Westminster or parts of the United Kingdom to Northern Ireland. I point out to the Member that we are not in a unique position. Indeed, of all the regions of the United Kingdom, probably only two are in surplus; the

others are in deficit. That is very often because of where most economic activity is generated. The more that we can generate and grow our economy here, the less dependent we will be on public sector spending, especially for benefits, etc, and the more revenue we will generate, whether through income tax or national insurance. Will we ever not have a deficit? I doubt it very much. I think that nine other regions of the United Kingdom are also in deficit because of their geographical position and because it is difficult to attract investment and generate economic activity. That is the benefit, of course, of being in the Union: we are part of a bigger constitutional unit in which the weaker areas can be helped by the stronger ones.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I suppose that many people listening to the questions and answers here today will be surprised to learn that we do not have accurate figures on revenue collected. Can the Minister suggest any steps that could be taken to ensure that, in future, we have more accurate figures?

Mr Wilson: First, I want to dispel the idea, which seems to be behind all the questions, that, somehow or other, the figures are simply made up. They are not. The methodology for collecting the figures has been accepted by those who are responsible for compiling official statistics in the United Kingdom. They abide by the code that is laid down for compiling statistics. These are not wild guesstimates; they are estimates based on criteria and methodologies accepted by those who are responsible for compiling statistics.

As far as greater accuracy is concerned, the more that one drills down into the figures, the more that one tries to ally the figures to a measure that closely reflects them. I will give the Member an example, which is how we estimate VAT. We look at the household survey to see what people in Northern Ireland spend their money on, and we take the VAT attributable to those kinds of goods and multiply it by the number of families, which gives us the estimate. To me, that is a fairly robust way of estimating the amount of VAT gathered in Northern Ireland: what are people's spending methods, what is the rate of VAT levied on those goods and how many families are there? Of course, given that the list of things that people spend their money on —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister's two minutes are up.

Mr Wilson: — is generalised, that figure is, to some degree, bound to be an estimate.

Special Advisers

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the appeals mechanism in the code of conduct for special advisers. (AQO 3488/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I interpret the question to mean what appeals mechanism is set out in the arrangements introduced in September 2011 for appointing special advisers.

My Department applies the vetting/character checking process to prospective special advisers, as it does to all other civil servants. Under those arrangements, I undertook to review the appointment process. My Department makes a recommendation to the appointing Minister about a test of character. For special advisers only, an independent appeals process has been built into the decision-making process. If a Minister or a prospective candidate for a special adviser post disagrees with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) recommendation, an appeal can be made. That will be to an external body that will not have any contact with DFP, the Civil Service or Ministers. The panel will be totally independent, and it will take a number of factors into consideration when hearing a person's appeal.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his detailed reply. From the tenor of the reply, I assume that this appeals mechanism has not yet been used. In the event of it being used, who would choose the independent members of the panel, how big would the panel be, and where would those members come from?

Mr Wilson: It has not been used to date. All special advisers have gone through the vetting process, but it has not been necessary to use the panel as yet.

The panel would be made up of outside individuals. They would be chosen by the Department, and, I imagine, would probably be individuals such as trade union officials, people who have been involved in adjudicating on labour relations issues or other such independent people. They will be totally independent of the Department, the Civil Service and any of the parties — there would be no political involvement in any of that. We would envisage an appeal panel of uneven numbers, probably three.

Mr Ross: How far apart are the arrangements that the Minister has put in place and those in the private Member's Bill that has been brought to the House by Mr Allister? Does he still believe that that private Member's Bill is necessary?

Mr Wilson: The view that I took —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I warn Members that this is Question Time to the Minister of Finance and Personnel and not on a future private Member's Bill.

Mr Wilson: I think that the question that was being asked was what was my view vis-à-vis the arrangements that I have in place and the arrangements that Mr Allister has brought to the House.

It was always my view that something that is agreed among the parties would be much better, rather than having to go down a route of a vote being taken in the Assembly on the issue. Whether it had a statutory basis or simply had the basis of guidance that I had issued, the important thing to me was that it had the agreement of all the parties. Sadly, at the time of the Bill's introduction and its Second Stage, that agreement was not in place. Therefore, I took the view at that stage — I still hold it — that, given the concerns, it was necessary to have something in place that we could apply to all special advisers.

The concern I had at that stage with Mr Allister's Bill was the fact that there was no appeals mechanism, and as I said in answer to Mr Maginness's question, I believe that an appeals mechanism is important. Basically, Mr Allister's arrangements were much more absolutist than mine, and I always believed that they could be improved by including an appeals mechanism. That would allow us to have those arrangements on a statutory footing, and they would apply to everyone who was appointed as a special adviser.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am prepared to take another couple of supplementary questions, but that is on the basis that they are about the question and not the Bill.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as uchta a fhreagra. Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you, and I thank the Minister for his responses. Given that the CBI and the trade unions supported the guidelines produced by OFMDFM, will the Minister call for those to be implemented? That will ensure that

employers have the flexibility to select the right person for the job.

Mr Wilson: Whether we use the guidelines that I introduced or put the issue on a statutory footing, a number of important things should be considered. First, the arrangements should apply to all special advisers. Secondly, they should assure people that they can stand the test of time and cannot easily be changed in the future. Thirdly, they should give everyone a fair opportunity, even if they have involved themselves in something in the past that people would have regarded as wrong and tarnished their public image. They should be given the chance to show that they had changed, etc. Those were the important things to me. That was what was on offer; it was not accepted, and the Assembly will decide at some time in the future what is the best way of doing that. I am saying only what all the ingredients are. There should be a mechanism for vetting people who are appointed to such posts. If they disagree with that vetting, there should be a mechanism for them to have their say. There should then be an independent assessment of the case that they have made to decide whether they are suitable for the job.

2.15 pm

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that one of the fallouts from the Mary McArdle appointment was a realisation that procedures that had no regard for the thoughts or interests of victims were lacking in a material consideration? Therefore, as well as looking at pertinent matters such as contrition, any review mechanism should, if it can, devise a means whereby the views of those most directly affected, namely, the victims of the individual, can be taken on board.

Mr Wilson: My view was that any mechanism of appeal, review or whatever it happens to be should be transparent and clear enough to ensure that people appointed to these positions had the confidence of the general public. If they had been engaged in something in their past, they would be able to show, because of changes in their attitude, lifestyle and the fact that they had shown remorse for their deeds, that they could gain that confidence. If one of the ways of building that confidence is to feed in the kind of information that the Member suggested, of course the Assembly needs to look at doing that in any appeal mechanism.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been answered. Question 6 has been withdrawn and transferred.

Procurement: NIAO Report

7. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Department of Finance and Personnel — Collaborative Procurement and Aggregated Demand'. (AQO 3491/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I welcome the Audit Office report into collaborative procurement and aggregated demand. It has raised a number of important issues. The recommendations are being considered by the procurement board. The report will be the subject of a Public Accounts Committee (PAC) hearing on 29 May, and while the matters are under consideration by the PAC, I do not want to comment a great deal on the particular issues. However, there are general points, of course, in the report that I am quite happy to answer questions on today.

Mr Rogers: How does the Minister propose to manage the risks of our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) being detrimentally affected by increased aggregation of demand and collaboration?

Mr Wilson: The report highlights the fact that there could be a conflict between having collaborative procurement — where we bundle all the public sector contracts into one big contract to gain economies of scale and reduce the cost — and maintaining our current record of ensuring that SMEs get a fair share of public sector contracts in Northern Ireland. It is a conflict; the report recognises that, and so must Members. If we want to make savings in large-scale contracts, we must recognise that that may well preclude firms. Just this week, I have dealt with letters and with queries from Ministers who have asked me questions about maintenance contracts that have been bundled together. Therefore, the bigger the contract, the more that you ask people for working capital guarantees and turnover guarantees because of the size of the contract. Once you do that, you exclude a lot of small firms. That is something that the Audit Office and the Assembly have to be aware of. There is that conflict. One of the things that you can do, of course, is get a lot of small companies to tender collaboratively or, where there is a big contract, get some of it split up so that small subcontractors can come in.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Is a collaborative approach taken to energy contracts?

Mr Wilson: As far as energy contracts are concerned, DFP's property division, which has responsibility for the Northern Ireland Government estate, has collaborative contracts for fuel and for electricity. However, that does not include all public sector bodies. For example, Translink is not included, and neither is Northern Ireland Water.

Collaborative contracts work better when you are dealing with large-scale firms. There is no danger of excluding smaller firms from purchasing electricity, because only a couple of companies here in Northern Ireland generate and sell it. There are collaborative contracts that mean that you do not have the problem that Mr Rogers highlighted in his question. Of course, we ought to look more intensively at those.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. In light of the failure to deliver on the projected savings throughout the collaborative procurement, would the Minister agree that a centralised procurement group, perhaps based in his Department, could help to achieve maximum savings?

Mr Wilson: Various centres of procurement expertise (COPEs) in a number of Departments are responsible for procurement in those Departments. There are sometimes very good reasons for that, because expertise is particular to one Department or whatever. Although I would like to expand my empire, I am not so sure that centralising all procurement under one body would always be the best solution. Secondly, and as I said, where there is that kind of joint approach, there is a danger that some of the smaller firms would lose out.

In the procurement board, we will be looking at where different COPEs can perhaps come together to hear about the kind of things that we are going to purchase this year and whether some of those things can be banded together. Even if COPEs insist on having their own contracts, another way of doing it may be to at least standardise the kind of things that we purchase. For example, if you are purchasing desks, do you need 10 varieties? Can you not have one variety so that, even though each individual COPE is purchasing, you know that there is one standard kind of desk and that you can, therefore, get the cost down?

North/South Co-operation: Expenditure

8. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what is the annual net expenditure to

the Executive from North/South co-operation. (AQO 3492/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The Executive incur expenditure through their contribution to the running of the North/South bodies that were established under the Good Friday Agreement. In 2011-12 that amounted to a total expenditure of £38.9 million. In addition, Northern Ireland Departments engage in practical co-operation with the Republic of Ireland on the delivery of public services. As I said in another debate in the House, that includes healthcare and education, etc. The net cost of that practical co-operation is £11.2 million. That is mainly a result of more students using schools in Northern Ireland, whether those are primary schools or further education colleges, than we have people going across the border to be taught in the Republic.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he advise us whether the North/South bodies are subject to delivering savings during the Budget period?

Mr Wilson: They are required to deliver savings. The savings of 3% a year that they are required to deliver are the same as those that Northern Ireland Departments are required to deliver. That is up until 2013. The savings beyond 2013 have not been established yet, but, for the past two years, they have been required to make savings of 3%, and they have met those targets. There will be a requirement of 3% this year, and, of course, it is then up to Ministers from Northern Ireland and the Republic to look at what savings are made beyond that.

I can assure the Member that, in all the conversations that I have had with them, Ministers from the Republic are as keen as I am to see savings made in the cross-border bodies.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Is he willing to acknowledge the reality that co-operation between Departments on a single-island basis, rather than incurring unnecessary or unreasonable expenditure, contributes to financial savings, not least in health?

Mr Wilson: The logic of that is for the Republic to stop being so stand-offish and join the United Kingdom, and we would then have the benefits of the whole of the United Kingdom in which to share those services. However, that is probably as much of a fairy tale as Sinn Féin's

hope of getting a united Ireland by 2016. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, you are well off the mark. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Wilson: I was referring to the question.

Let me address the issue. I have had meetings with Ministers from the Republic, and I have no difficulty with sharing facilities across the border if that helps to reduce costs for us and them. Only a fool would say that we should not do that. My one concern is where we provide services but do not get payment for them, which means that they are being provided at a net cost to taxpayers in Northern Ireland.

However, there are many good examples. The Health Minister, who is sitting beside me, has, for example, made it quite clear that one of the ways in which to keep local provision at Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry is for greater use of it to be made by people from across the border. We have a cancer unit at Altnagelvin Hospital that came about only because part of the capital cost and the ongoing revenue cost is shared by the Republic, whereby people from Donegal can come across to Londonderry. We have gained from that. We could not have had a stand-alone facility at Altnagelvin Hospital were it to rely on Northern Ireland custom alone. By having input from the Republic and hammering down that it would make a contribution, the people of the north-west have the benefit of a cancer unit at Altnagelvin.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. Are he and his Department consulted by other Departments on any new proposed initiatives on cross-border co-operation?

Mr Wilson: If such initiatives are purely within the remit of individual Ministers and do not require, for example, additional capital for which bids are required to be made, individual Departments are very often left to engage in those arrangements. However, in many such instances — I have spoken with the Finance Minister in the Republic on a number of occasions about this — the initial impetus will come from the two Finance Ministers, who will ask whether co-operation is possible between Departments, after which individual Ministers and Departments will get on with the job.

Executive: Savings Delivery Plans

9. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what advice his Department gives to

other Departments regarding savings delivery plans. (AQO 3493/11-15)

Mr Wilson: Responsibility for the development of departmental savings delivery plans rests with individual Ministers. However, at the outset of the process, and to assist them in developing their plans, DFP issued guidance to Departments outlining the key issues that they needed to consider. A key element of that guidance was to highlight to Departments that, in the first instance, savings should be made from reductions in administration and improvements in efficiency. Where that cannot be achieved, Departments should seek to identify savings measures that minimise the impact on front line public services.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has he set any parameters for the cuts in administration costs — say, 10% — that he hopes to get? What co-operation is he getting from all Departments? Are any in default of co-operation?

Mr Wilson: The Departments are required to make savings of 3% a year. In all years of the Budget so far, all Departments have met that requirement, and some have exceeded it.

One or two Departments have fallen short by maybe 1% or 2% in a particular year and picked it up in the next year. However, by and large, all Departments have met or exceeded the targets. The complaint has been that the savings that have been made by cutting front line services are not regarded as real efficiency savings. That is one of the comments that was made in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report.

2.30 pm

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 2 and 12 have been withdrawn and require written answers. As Mr John McCallister is not in his place, I call Mr Chris Hazzard.

Public Health: Beef Products

3. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether there is any public health risk involved in eating beef products that have been contaminated with horse meat. (AQO 3502/11-15)

Mr Poots: On the basis of evidence, there is no food safety risk to consumers from implicated meat products. However, this is an unacceptable situation. People have a right to expect that the food that they are eating is correctly described. It is the responsibility of food businesses to ensure that the food that they sell contains what it says on the label. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is following all lines of inquiry in this investigation and working with all the relevant authorities, including other government Departments, district councils, police forces and authorities in other European countries. Swift action has been taken where there is evidence of fraudulent activity.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Can the Minister outline who funds the FSA here and who it is accountable to?

Mr Poots: The Food Standards Agency is funded directly by us, but it is not responsible to the Assembly as such. It is a body that is outside the Assembly. That arrangement was set up because of the issues that surrounded the BSE problems and the lack of faith in politicians at that point in time.

I note that the Member's party has suggested that the Food Standards Agency should maybe come under political authority. That is the same party that called for an independent environment protection agency just a few years ago. It appears that that party has done somersaults on this issue.

Ms Brown: Will the Minister clarify the position on the slaughter of horses in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: It is legal to slaughter horses and to sell horse meat in the United Kingdom provided that it comes from an approved abattoir and carries an official stamp declaring that it is fit for human consumption.

Until a relatively short time ago, horses were killed in Northern Ireland at a rate of around 40 every fortnight. Those horses were exported, and that trade was legal, legitimate and carried out properly. The company has since discontinued that course of work because it was interfering with other aspects of its business. However, there was no indication whatsoever or evidence of any kind that that particular horse meat was ending up in the food market in Northern Ireland or the United Kingdom.

Mr McClarty: Given the unexpected nature of the horse meat scandal, is the Minister confident in the assurances that he has been

given and those that he, in turn, has given himself?

Mr Poots: Confidence should lie in why this meat would not be fit for human consumption. It would not be fit for human consumption if contained bute, which is a drug that is given to horses. Of the tests carried out on horse carcasses by 30 January, 100% indicated that bute was not present in any of those carcasses. A huge amount of testing has been carried out. We are satisfied that this is not a danger to the public from a food safety perspective.

This is a labelling issue. It is an issue of fraudulent behaviour. I trust that people will be in court and charged in due course. Some of those involved are very big companies. Let us be honest: they need to be gone after and pursued rigorously. However, this is not a food safety issue. That has been our line throughout, because it is accurate.

Accident and Emergency Departments: Waiting Times

4. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline how many breaches of the 12-hour waiting time have occurred in accident and emergency departments since November 2012. (AQO 3503/11-15)

15. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to reduce accident and emergency waiting times at Antrim Area Hospital. (AQO 3514/11-15)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 15 together, as they relate to emergency department performance.

From 1 November 2012 to 31 January 2013, 1,656 patients waited longer than 12 hours for admission or discharge to emergency departments. That represents an average of 1% of all attendances across the health and social care trusts. In Antrim Area Hospital, 632 patients or 3.7% of patients waited longer than 12 hours during that period. While those figures are an improvement on the same period in 2011-12, it is unacceptable to me that anyone has to wait that length of time. I continue to look to the Health and Social Care Board and trusts to ensure that action is taken to further improve waiting times and the patient experience in our emergency departments.

While there has been some improvement in the A&E waiting times at Antrim Area Hospital, that improvement has not, in my view, been sufficient. It is for that reason, and in recognition of the challenges that the trust is facing, that I took the decision, in December, to appoint a small turnaround and support team to complete a strategic overview in order to establish what changes and support might be required to accelerate progress. The turnaround and support team is working alongside the support already being provided by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the Public Health Agency through the emergency department improvement action group. I expect these initiatives to impact positively on waiting times at Antrim Area Hospital's emergency department.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Considering the fact that A&Es are backed up due to other issues in hospitals, what changes have been made to ensure that other consultants work in the evenings? How many hospitals carry out discharges in the evenings?

Mr Poots: We are operating on the basis of an improved performance across the system. For example, we have had no reported 12-hour breaches for the Royal Victoria Hospital. However, I do not find it acceptable that there are six-, seven- or eight-hour breaches; those are not acceptable waiting times either. Certainly, my drive for the services within our emergency departments is that we take all the waiting times down to less than four hours, although the target is not yet set at that.

We are seeing a different kind of performance from our hospitals. We are looking at a whole-hospital system. The HSCB and the improvement action group continue to work with trusts to improve processes to provide greater flexibility in our hospitals, including pharmacy, and to ensure that we get swifter discharges and better admission rates, including direct admissions from GPs. In all that, there are great opportunities for continued improvement. I welcome the improvement that has happened thus far, but it does not go far enough.

Mr Beggs: In the Minister's initial answer, he referred to the considerable 12-hour breaches in our A&E units. Can he advise us about why there are significant failures to hit the four-hour waiting time targets at our hospitals when most hospitals in the rest of the United Kingdom meet the National Health Service standards?

Mr Poots: Yes; between November 2012 and January 2013, 76.5% of patients received emergency care or were discharged within the four-hour period. I do not accept that as being good enough. We need to ensure that we make further improvements on that, and we need to move up to those targets. I do not see any reason why we cannot reach where everyone else is in the UK. I will continue to keep that pressure on the trusts. We are not at a situation that is acceptable to the public; therefore, we need to expect better performance and improvement.

I think that I have made that very clear, particularly in the Northern Trust area. Performance was falling well short of the mark there, and that is why we have the turnaround team. It is also one of the reasons why the chairman is not there anymore. We did not have an acceptance that such improvement could be made, and I do not accept that improvement cannot be made. I will continue to pressurise, to harass and to cajole until we get the figures up where they should be. Certainly, it is not acceptable to me otherwise, and I do not think that it is acceptable to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call Sue Ramsey, I remind Members that I would not normally allow her to ask a supplementary since she will be asking a question immediately after this, but I am treating this as an exceptional case.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I appreciate that. Minister, you are aware of the stuff in the media about the Ulster Hospital. Will you outline why patients were there with the ambulance crews for four hours? Will you outline whether there was a divert to the Ulster Hospital, and, in turn, did the Ambulance Service divert away from the Ulster Hospital?

Mr Poots: There are divers, on an ongoing basis, from the Ulster Hospital to the Royal, and I will deal with that a little more in a moment. Yesterday, there were 66 ambulances at the Ulster Hospital, and last Monday there were 68. Normally, the figure is somewhere in the 50s. When you have the ambulances pulling up, you normally get 60% of the people in those ambulances admitted to the hospital. The increase in ambulances meant that there were an additional six admissions.

The situation has proved very tight when it comes to the number of admissions that are taking place in the South Eastern Trust area. There have been more medical admissions, and there is quite an elderly population in that

area. Consequently, the hospital is under greater pressure. The Royal does take divers from the Ulster Hospital. We need to give some consideration to that because although the Ulster is the main hospital in the Trust area, which also contains Downe and Lagan Valley, it does not have the capacity that the Belfast Trust has in terms of acute beds.

We would do well to give some consideration to the number of beds that are likely to become available in the Ulster Hospital on a particular day. If it is recognised that there are pressures, the divers should be put in place earlier to ensure that the pressures are absorbed in a better way. We do not want to see people waiting in ambulances outside a hospital. That is not the type of care that this Assembly wants. We are talking to the trusts and the HSCB about that. Hugh McCaughey has spent some time with us today to talk about those issues.

Mr I McCrea: Like the Minister, I was totally appalled to hear the figures for Antrim Area Hospital, with 632 patients having to wait over 12 hours. Does the Minister believe that the turnaround team that he has in place in the Northern Trust area, whilst it may have the desire to make changes, has the wherewithal to tackle that issue? If it does not, what steps can the Minister take?

Mr Poots: The turnaround team has dealt with other areas and seen significant improvement as a consequence. We need the Northern Trust's co-operation and willingness to work with the turnaround team. Thus far, that has been the case. We also need an ability to take difficult decisions, because we cannot go through life making easy decisions all of the time. Sometimes, you have to make those hard decisions. If people are not up to that and do not want to make those hard decisions, there is not a place for them. I do not have any evidence that that is the case, but we will continue to work with the Northern Trust on the issue.

Let me be absolutely clear: the service that the public are receiving from emergency departments, particularly at Antrim hospital, is not acceptable. I do not want that to continue. We are making an investment in the capital infrastructure there, but we need to support it through personnel, and we have been doing that.

We need to get very clear evidence on how this can be moved forward, and then we need to move it forward. The very clear position of myself, the Department and the HSCB is that

we can turn this around, and we will endeavour to do so over the next number of months.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his answers. The Minister has put great emphasis on the turnaround team finding a solution to the problems, particularly at Antrim hospital. Is that team independent of the trust and the Department, or is it in some way connected to the trust? In what way is it actually working?

2.45 pm

Mr Poots: It is wholly independent of the trust and the Department. The turnaround team from Cumbria is doing the work at no cost to us. I greatly appreciate the work and support that the team is giving us, and they are people who have expertise in turning difficult situations around. It will work only if we get co-operation. People in the trust may want to carry on doing the same thing that they have always done and getting the same results — I am sorry, but that will not be good enough. If people are obstructive, they will need to look at themselves because they do not fulfil the role that we require in the health service. We need a health service that can respond to difficulties and respond very swiftly and effectively to the needs of the public. I expect that the turnaround team will receive full co-operation to achieve that.

Protect Life Strategy

5. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the Protect Life strategy in light of the 100% increase in suicide over the last 10 years. (AQO 3504/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern Ireland suicide rate doubled before the Protect Life strategy was published in late 2006. However, the rate has remained high, with an average of 277 recorded deaths each year since 2007. The Northern Ireland Audit Office has acknowledged that the relative impact of the Protect Life strategy on suicide is difficult to estimate because suicide is primarily a societal issue and is, therefore, influenced by a very wide range of interacting factors. International evidence indicates that efforts to reduce national suicide trends need to be sustained and long-term.

There is no such thing as a quick fix to this highly complex problem. Undoubtedly, lives have been saved through Protect Life services, but it is not possible to estimate how many. Independent evaluation has identified a number of positive outcomes as a result of Protect Life, including strong community engagement in

prevention, a reduction in stigma and raised awareness. Areas highlighted for improvement include better prioritisation of actions and enhanced cross-departmental working to address the underlying wider issues that contribute to increased risk.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. It is an issue that the rate has increased 100% over the past 10 years. Despite all of what you have just said, Minister, and despite the work that is done daily, you told us last week or the week before that the ministerial subgroup had met recently but was not due to meet again until August. I appeal to you to recognise that that time frame is too long. Do you believe that suicide is a priority in your Department and in the Executive? I am concerned that we seem to take a run at suicide and suicide issues and it then falls away again. If the ministerial subgroup does not meet until August, that does not send a clear message.

Mr Poots: The only Ministers who turned up to the last meeting were Minister Ford and me. Ministers need to take suicide seriously, because it is a very serious issue. That said, there is a series of actions to be carried out from the meetings, one of which is to promote positive mental health through sport, working with the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure and, to reach rural communities, working with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

So cross-departmental work is flowing from those meetings, and it is more important to develop actions in those meetings that are then followed up and carried through. It is very clearly our intention to carry those actions through to make that difference because there is no single answer to this. However, if we keep taking incremental steps and have a series of people doing a series of different things, that will help to get the message out that suicide is not the best but the worst option and that people should think over and over again and seek help if they have suicidal thoughts.

Mr Weir: What changes are being made as a result of refreshing the Protect Life strategy?

Mr Poots: The strategy, which was published in June last year, contained a number of new actions, including involving sporting organisations in delivering positive mental health and well-being messages; identifying specific arts interventions; and providing community-based health checks in rural areas.

The Public Health Agency is taking forward a number of additional enhanced services, including self-harm and family support services; self-harm training in support of National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines for the management of self-harm; additional and enhanced services for vulnerable and marginalised groups; and the development of a new public information campaign. As well as that, we are doing more work with sporting organisations and direct work with rural communities, so a considerable amount of work is flowing from that programme.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for the meetings that he has held with groups in my constituency of East Belfast on suicide, and I give credit where credit is due for his attention to the matter in my constituency. In what way will he, his Department or the Public Health Agency be responding to the very specific increase in death by suicide in East Belfast? In particular, what is his assessment of how the "card before you leave" scheme, sudden death reporting and community response systems are working?

Mr Poots: East Belfast has come to light recently because of the high number of suicides in that constituency. That has not been a recent trend but has been ongoing for some time. It is an area where we need to ensure that people have the opportunities to deal with their problems.

Not everyone who has suicide ideation has presented with mental health issues, so there is a course of work that can be done on the mental health side to have people admitted to psychiatric units more quickly when GPs recommend it, to have them discharged more quickly and to have GPs take on more of the work after discharge. If people have to wait for eight weeks from being referred by a GP before they are admitted to a psychiatric unit, a huge amount of damage is done, and they then have to spend considerably longer in a unit. We will get a much quicker turnaround of people through the units and deal with them more effectively in that way.

The majority of people who take their own life have not previously presented with mental health issues, so it is very important to get messages out through sporting clubs and various organisations where you can speak to people, relate to them and get the message to them that there is hope and opportunity and a chance for a better life and for them to think again if they have suicide ideation.

Mr Gardiner: The increase in suicide rates is of great concern. Does the Minister accept that the legacy of decades of violence has contributed to the traumatisation of communities and individuals and has left a legacy of unaddressed mental health needs?

Mr Poots: I have absolutely no doubt that the legacy of violence is a contributory factor. We still have groups that are organised in our communities. There is still a level of fear in many communities. People who have committed crimes in the past have difficulty living with those crimes. Others have been victims of violence and have found it difficult to cope. I have absolutely no doubt that the legacy of the Troubles is still presenting itself in the form of suicide, and the Member has put his finger on that issue.

Cancer Care

6. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the extent of collaboration taking place in cancer care. (AQO 3505/11-15)

Mr Poots: In recent years, we have seen the principle of collaboration and co-operation mainstreamed into cancer care. At a local level, multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) collaborate to deliver the best care pathway for individual patients. MDTs are groups of health professionals including nurses, doctors, physiotherapists and occupational therapists who work together to discuss a patient's treatment and care.

At the regional level, patients have benefited from the reconfiguration of cancer services on a hub-and-spoke model, with the Belfast cancer centre working collaboratively with the cancer units at Altnagelvin, Antrim, Craigavon and the Ulster Hospital. We are also working collaboratively at a national and international level, most notably in the development of radiotherapy services at Altnagelvin, which will treat patients from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Northern Ireland also contributes to national and international programmes that provide us with valuable benchmarking information to ensure that real progress is being made in cancer services.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I place on record the appreciation of many people in Northern Ireland who have benefited greatly as a result of the care that has been provided for them when they go through what can only be described as a very traumatic time. Will the Minister elaborate on the benefits to

Northern Ireland of working with countries such as the United States of America on cancer?

Mr Poots: The funding agencies in Ireland and Northern Ireland have worked with the Department for Employment and Learning and Invest NI and have developed common documentation and working procedures to deal with funding proposals involving health research from both jurisdictions and the US. That is being implemented and was launched in August 2012. That allows for two health projects funded through the partnership, and will support the salaries of 15 clinical and academic researchers who are delivering outcomes in line with the aims of the partnership, spanning healthcare advancements and economic development. A recent highlight was the publication of major findings and identification of genes that may cause some patients with diabetes to develop serious kidney disease, while other diabetic patients do not.

We are working very hard through the National Cancer Institute Cancer Consortium. The five work stream areas that have been identified for that are capital building for clinical research; public health and well-being; prevention and health promotion, to include population health research; nursing, palliative and end-of-life care; and survivorship. All of that is helping Northern Ireland become more skilled and more advanced and to deliver better results when it comes to treating people with cancer.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra, agus seo í mo cheist féin ar an ábhar áirithe seo. Has the Minister any plans to develop cross-border links with the Beacon Hospital in Dublin, which has recently installed pioneering new stereotactic body radiation therapy (SBRT) equipment called CyberKnife, which has been shown to have extremely positive outcomes on some cancers?

Mr Poots: We have just recently installed a new facility in the Belfast City Hospital that allows us to carry out that stereotactic work, and we are training staff to enable them to take that further. So, very good work is going on in Belfast City Hospital's cancer unit to enable people who are currently travelling outside of Northern Ireland to receive that care.

We want to maximise the amount of care that we can carry out here in Northern Ireland. However, when there are people who have conditions that need treated by further

expertise, we are happy to work with others, whether in GB or in the Republic of Ireland, to ensure they receive appropriate care.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his information around collaboration on cancer. Will he confirm the timeline of 2015 or 2016 for the work on the north-west cancer unit?

Mr Poots: The north-west cancer unit should be finished by 2015, with commissioning to take place to have it operational by 2016. That work continues to progress and there is no indication that there is any delay on it.

Ulster Hospital: Operations

7. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many operations have been postponed in the Ulster Hospital over the last 12 months. (AQO 3506/11-15)

Mr Poots: During the period January to December 2012, there were 305 patients on the waiting list for an operation who had the notified date for their operation deferred.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given the issues raised by the Chair of the Committee, will the Minister tell us whether further operations have had to be cancelled because of those events?

Mr Poots: Almost on a daily basis, obviously, a procedure is cancelled, but that is for very good reasons. If someone is waiting for an orthopaedic procedure, but there has been a major traumatic car crash the previous night, obviously the surgeons are called away to carry out that work. If someone is waiting for a heart operation but someone else has had a heart attack the previous night, very often the surgeons are called in to carry out the operations on the cardiac table.

So it is just a fact of life that many times operations that are elective have to be cancelled because of emergency procedures. That is one of the reasons why we have gone down a route with Belfast City Hospital of making it, almost exclusively, an elective centre so that operations are not cancelled, and that mix between emergency and elective does not happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up. Members will take their ease while we change the top Table.

3.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Assembly Business

Mr Beggs: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise to you and to the Assembly for not being in my place during questions to the Finance Minister. I will endeavour to be in my place — *[Interruption.]* — in the future and not to be caught out by others who withdraw questions.

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the Member for coming to the House and apologising for not being in his place during Question Time. Other Members were not in their place, and I hope that they will follow the Member's example in coming to the House and apologising.

Two weeks ago or more, some Members were not in their place and have still to apologise or give a reason why they were not in their place. We are keeping a watching brief on the issue, and we will deal with those Members who feel that they should not come to the House and apologise or give a reason. However, I thank the Member for coming to the House and apologising to the whole House.

Private Members' Business

Ad Hoc Committee: Parliament Buildings

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee to deal with issues surrounding flags, emblems, symbols and language at Parliament Buildings and to report to the Assembly. — [Ms Ruane.]

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on the issue, although I am not sure why it has been brought to the House. Reinventing the wheel is not normally recognised as good practice, particularly if things are working well. We have an Assembly Commission, which I do not think that there have been any complaints about in the past. It appears to me to be working well. It has a good history, and, going right back to 1998, it has dealt with very sensitive issues over the lifetime of the Assembly. So, the proposal —

Ms Ruane: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Poots: Yes, I will.

Ms Ruane: I absolutely agree that, in the past, the Assembly Commission worked on consensus. The problem here is that your party brought a proposal to the Assembly Commission that went against what your party and, indeed, other parties agreed in 2002. That was that the place for flags and discussion around flags is in the Chamber and not in the Assembly Commission. So, the reason why it worked well was because you did not bring the issue to the Assembly Commission. However, you have now reneged on that, and that is what is causing the difficulty.

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

Mr Poots: That was an interesting speech from the Member, and I will deal with those issues as I go through what I have to say.

The Assembly Commission has an exemplary history, and we commend it for the work that it has done. However, I see today's motion as somewhat of a vote of no confidence in the Assembly Commission by the Member and thus in her membership of the Commission. The

fact that Sinn Féin does not bother to turn up for Assembly Commission meetings does not ring very well with democracy and does not demonstrate that it has a real commitment to the democratic institution that is here and in the Assembly Commission. Of course, I think that Ms Ruane deems democracy to be whatever Sinn Féin says that it happens to be at a particular time. So, in some instances, you have to have a weighted majority, and in others, you have to have a majority of both communities. However, Sinn Féin is quite happy for Belfast City Council to have a majority vote, although, if a similar vote were to take place in the Assembly, it would have to be by consensus. Belfast City Council does not have to recognise consensus for Sinn Féin, but this House does. Where is the difference? There is no difference, but there is in Ms Ruane's world. She needs to explain to the House why she demands consensus here but accepts majority rule just a few miles down the road.

I know that Ms Ruane has some difficulty accepting realities. The reality that we have here is that this is an Administration that has powers devolved to it from Westminster. As far as I know, she does not live in the United Kingdom, but she is employed in the United Kingdom. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: She takes British sterling, and, obviously, with the powers devolved from Westminster, as a former Minister in the Assembly, she brought forward legislation that had to be signed off by Her Majesty the Queen.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Poots: As a Minister in this House, Ms Ruane was quite happy to bring forward legislation that had to receive Royal Assent before one single shred of it could be enacted. She needs to accept the reality that this is part of the United Kingdom, whether she likes it or not. It is internationally recognised, and there are tripartite agreements recognising that. That will change only when the people of Northern Ireland consent to doing something different, and local indications recently suggest that that consent is not forthcoming. In fact, it is very much the opposite.

We have a system that works very well in the House, and I think that we should stick to a system that works well in the House. We should not be cajoled into doing something different because Sinn Féin likes consensus in

one place but majority rule in another, and it does not know whether it is coming or going when it comes to democratic issues, but there is no particular surprise there. I am wholly opposed to the motion and commend the Assembly Commission on the work that it has been doing.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I suppose that it is to be welcomed that we are here today discussing how we deal with flags, emblems, symbols and language at Parliament Buildings. Cuirim fáilte roimh an díospóireacht seo inniu. We need to address the issues in an open and transparent way if we are to be faithful to the sentiments of the Assembly Commission action plan.

The Good Friday Agreement tells us that we are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect. De réir Chomhaontú Aoine an Chéasta, táimid tiomanta do chomhpháirtíocht, chomhionannas, agus do mheas ar a chéile. If equality is about everyone being treated the same, with all our traditions and cultures being respected, this Building, which houses the power-sharing Assembly, does little to address that. There is no evidence of equality here. Níl aon fhianaise go bhfuil comhionannas anseo. We have heard already about flags and emblems, but I would like to put a particular focus on the issue of the Irish language. Ba mhaith liom díriú ar leith ar an Ghaeilge. The Assembly Commission literature states:

"Parliament Buildings hosts a large number of events and visitors each year and has a significant opportunity to play a leading role in the encouragement of dialogue, shared learning and mutual respect for different faiths and cultural backgrounds."

Despite those positive words, there is merely a nod and a wink to them when it comes to respect for the culture of Irish speakers here.

A welcome sheet showing a plan of the Building is available at reception. It points out different parts of the Building, and it is available in a variety of languages. If you look carefully through the sheets, you will eventually come upon one in Irish. If you ask in advance, you can come up here and take the Parliament Buildings tour in Irish, but only if you give notice. Caithfidh tú iarratas a chur isteach roimh ré más maith leat an turas ar Fhoirgnimh na Parlaiminte a dhéanamh as Gaeilge. Those are minimal gestures only, and they are not enough. We need to have an environment in which all — staff, Members and visitors — feel that their culture is treated with respect.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Ms McCorley: No, I will not. *[Interruption.]* That means that we should see bilingual signage around this entire Building.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms McCorley: Ciallaíonn sin gur chóir dúinn comharthaí dhá-theangacha a fheiceáil san Fhoirgneamh iomlán sin. Where we have a sign in English, it should also include Irish and Ulster Scots, if that is what people want. In the Chamber — *[Interruption.]*

Ms Ruane: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it appropriate that people are speaking while our colleague is trying to speak?

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor. Members should not shout across the Floor. Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat. In the Chamber, we should have a simultaneous translation system for all Members requiring it. Sometimes in this Assembly there are questions raised and negative comments made about the Irish language, but the fact is that there is a vibrant Irish language community out there that wishes to live life through the medium of Irish. They are entitled to services in this society and to have those delivered through the language of their choice.

The Irish-language community increases daily. Tá pobal na Gaeilge ag fás go laethúil. Well over 3,000 schoolchildren are currently being educated through the medium of Irish in over 80 schools throughout the North of Ireland. Why would anyone in the Assembly wish to make those children feel excluded or disrespected when they, like children from many other schools, pay a visit here? Why would anyone deny them their cultural respect? What does that say about this Assembly?

Mr Clarke: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I thought that the motion was about an Ad Hoc Committee on flags and emblems, and not a history lesson on Irish. Maybe we could get back to the motion.

Mr McCartney: On a further point of order.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me finish with this point of order. A number of Members have gone well outside the motion. *[Interruption.]* Order. Yes, of course, if Members, whatever

they are saying, can link it to the motion — but most who have spoken have gone well outside the motion.

Mr McCartney: Further to that point of order, they say that ignorance is bliss. If you read the motion, it says, "flags, emblems, symbols and language". So, read the motion before you make a point of order. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms Ruane: On a further point of order. At one point, I counted six men across the way speaking while my colleague was trying to make points. Then we had the comment on language. I would just ask the Speaker to make a ruling on the fact that she has been interrupted on every single occasion — by men, I have to say. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us show some courtesy, order and respect in the House. Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. And, yes, this is about language, so tá mise ag díriú ar an Ghaeilge.

I believe it would be a refreshing and positive signal to be coming from this Assembly at the start of Seachtain na Gaeilge if we could proclaim that we welcome cultural richness, celebrate diversity and respect all languages. Más féidir linn a rá os ard go gcuirimid fáilte roimh shaibhreas cultúrtha, éagsúlacht agus teanga.

We do not expect everyone to sign up to Líofa if they do not wish to do that. What we do expect is that we put an end to the barriers and begrudgery towards the Irish language that we have seen here so often. Let us see the establishment of the Ad Hoc Committee to discuss all these issues in a rational and respectful way. Tacaím leis an rún. I support the motion.

Mr McCausland: The proposal for an Ad Hoc Committee on these various issues is utterly unnecessary and completely unwarranted. There are some in the House who have a misunderstanding about the nature and constitutional position of Northern Ireland.

I listened on the television earlier to a contribution from the leader of the SDLP, Alasdair McDonnell, and, I think, another gentlemen called McDevitt, who probably sees himself as the leader-in-waiting. However, the

two of them were making a contribution in regard to the nature of Northern Ireland, and they seemed to have this confusion that it was somehow like a hybrid state and not quite British; what was it? There was clearly a lack of understanding on their part.

The reality and the fact is that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. Her Majesty The Queen is the sovereign of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Other people may have long-term aspirations and hopes — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr McCausland: They may have long-term aspirations and hopes, but the difference is that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom is not some vague aspiration or some long-term hope or strategy. It is a current, present, constitutional reality.

The United Kingdom's flag is the Union flag. It is, therefore, the only flag that should have a proper place in this Building. So, questions around flags are unnecessary because the fact of the matter is that it is the flag of the United Kingdom and whether it be here at the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont or, indeed, at the City Hall, which is the main civic building in the capital city of this part of the United Kingdom, the flying of the Union flag is the right thing because it is simply a reflection and representation of the constitutional reality of this part of the United Kingdom. It is not an aspiration. It is not about identity and culture, and so on. It is a reality.

3.15 pm

The second thing that was talked about was language. It is true that minority languages are part of the cultural heritage and cultural wealth of every country. The problem in regard to the Irish language is that, back in the early 1980s, at the time of the hunger strikes and soon after, when Sinn Féin started really stepping up its cultural war, we had a Sinn Féin publication that stated clearly that every word spoken in Irish was another bullet in the freedom struggle. That was talking about cultural war. It was not speaking about cultural wealth. I have never once heard any member of Sinn Féin stand up and say that what was put forward in that publication, which was the result of a seminar organised by cultural workers in Sinn Féin, was wrong. Sinn Féin has never disowned it, said that it got it wrong or apologised for it. Therefore, I can only assume that Sinn Féin still

stands by the view that every word spoken in Irish is another bullet in the freedom struggle.

Sometimes people say that political traditions are not represented here and that we need to deal with symbols and emblems. They say that there is no reflection of Irish republicanism in this Building.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes, I will.

Mr Humphrey: I am pleased to hear what the Member is saying. I wanted him to give way so that he could get an extra minute.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for that help.

Two quick points. First, there is representation in this Building of Irish republicanism. Outside this room there is, inscribed on a wall, a commemoration to Edgar Graham, a member of the Ulster Unionist Party who was murdered by the Provisional IRA. If you go elsewhere in the Building, you will find that there is representation in a similar manner. We have to be quite frank about that today. If one is talking here about an inclusive society, a shared society and a forward-moving society, the people on the Benches opposite must indeed turn their back on the sort of thinking that led to the death of Edgar Graham and to people saying that Irish being spoken was another bullet in the freedom struggle.

The final thing I will say is this: when people talk about consensus, I find it really does cause me great concern. The people who are talking about consensus are the people who named a children's playground in the Newry and Mourne council area after an IRA terrorist. If that is seen as consensus, if that is seen as forward thinking, if that is seen as a shared future, it is indeed a very strange view, and one that the SDLP in particular, which backed the naming of

Mr Speaker: Time is gone.

Mr McCausland: That is a very strange view of a shared future that it would put forward in our society, and certainly one that I could not subscribe to or understand.

Mr Speaker: I say to the whole House that I will not allow Members to abuse interventions to

allow another Member an extra minute. Interventions should make a contribution to the debate and should be genuine interventions. I warn the whole House. I hope that I do not have to warn the Member again. Let us move on.

Ms Ruane: I was going to make a point of order on exactly the point of Mr Humphrey's abuse of —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have dealt with that.

Mr Elliott: Clearly the difficulties in the debate highlight the difficulties that there are here in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in this Assembly Chamber. They highlight the lengths and extent to which Sinn Féin will go to cause division and problems within the Chamber and within Northern Ireland. I think that we have to be honest and clear: Sinn Féin does not want to be part of the United Kingdom, as is its express right. However, there is no reason why Sinn Féin should try to implement that view on everybody else against the will of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland. It is absolute and sheer hypocrisy for Sinn Féin to come to this Chamber and tell us that they are true democrats. Earlier in the debate, I heard Ms Ruane say that she was a democrat and ask whether we were afraid of the debate. She said, "Bring it on." Why, then, for almost 40 years, did they murder the citizens of this Province? Is that democracy? I do not believe that it is. Does she believe that it is her right to impose the will of their people on the other people of Northern Ireland? No; it is not.

I listened to her talk about democracy. If she is so keen on democracy, why do Sinn Féin MPs not take up their seats in the house of democracy at Westminster and argue their case in the way everybody else does? No; they are afraid of it. I see Mr McCartney making his views known — not orally, but with signals and signs. That is the petty and low terminology and attempts that they are bringing to this debate and the Chamber. That is regrettable.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Earlier, the proposer talked about us in the unionist community being able to celebrate our heroes. The heroes that republicans have are the likes of Hogan and Martin, who they commemorated in Dunloy, in my constituency, at the weekend. They were responsible for the murder of a British soldier. That is the type of heroes that the party opposite wants to emulate and put on a pedestal.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Elliott: I cannot disagree with the Member's sentiments. I do not know why we need an Ad Hoc Committee for this issue. We have a method and mechanism in the Assembly for dealing with it. Some Members from the parties opposite, and, indeed, the Alliance Party, have boycotted that process. That is some democracy. If they want to deal with the situation, let them deal with it through the proper mechanisms and processes that are already available in the Assembly. I recall —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: OK, if it is quick.

Mr Lyttle: Would you care to correct your last statement, given that the Alliance Party attended the most recent Commission meeting? You are continuing to peddle inaccuracies, as has been the case on this issue for about the past two months.

Mr Elliott: Have they attended all the meetings of the Commission that were to deal with this? My understanding is that they have not. If Mr Lyttle wants to correct that, let him tell me.

I witnessed the work of an ad hoc committee that Sinn Féin set up in Fermanagh council many years ago to deal with emblems and artefacts in the council's chamber and buildings. They said that they wanted a neutral working environment. They got all those artefacts and emblems removed, but what have they done now? They have introduced Irish on the headed paper and the vehicles. Is that a neutral working environment for many unionists who do not want it? No; it is absolutely not, and it is despised by them. They have turned it from being —

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: I have heard enough.

They have turned it from being what they said was not a neutral working environment for them, to a non-neutral working environment for unionists.

Quite often, I listen to them tell us about how great the Republic of Ireland is. The Republic of Ireland has its national flag, the Irish tricolour. When I am in the Republic of Ireland, I have no problem with it being flown there, because that is its national flag. If you look at the regulations there, you see that it is normal practice to fly the national flag on all military posts and from a number of important state buildings every day. So what is the difficulty with flying the Union

flag, which is our national flag, in Northern Ireland? There should not be any problem. I accept the Irish tricolour in the Republic of Ireland. Why is the Union flag not acceptable in Northern Ireland?

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Member for giving way. The Health Committee visited the Irish Republic, and we saw its Parliament. There is a tricolour flying from not only the building, but there is one inside the Chamber at the right-hand side of the Speaker. We should be looking to see where ours is, when it comes to our Speaker. There are also three tricolours in the Upper House. We have nothing here to display the fact that we are British.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for that. There is a challenge for you, Mr Speaker. I look forward to the next time we are having a debate in the Chamber — we will have a Union flag in each corner.

I do not know why this motion was brought forward in the first place, and I do not support it. There are mechanisms for dealing with it. Let us get on and deal with it.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag caint ar son an mholta seo. I will speak in favour of the motion, which deals very clearly with a specific issue. Obviously, some Members have not even bothered to read it, given some of their interventions today. The motion deals with flags, emblems, symbols and language. It does not proscribe any language, symbol, emblem or flag. It just wants a discussion of all that. I am left wondering why anyone would fear that type of discussion. Maybe Members, in their contributions, will try to explain.

Tom Elliott has a peculiar definition of democracy when it suits him and in a particular sense. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: The core of democracy is to let the people decide. So when Sinn Féin stands for election, it is written in very large letters that we do not take our seats in Westminster. We deliver on that, and we adhere to it. Just remember that. That is the definition of democracy.

One reason why we think that an ad hoc Committee is the best way to deal with this comes from the Commission on 2 June 2000:

"The Commission agreed that the flags issue is a political matter best handled by the Assembly."

So, in many ways, we are fulfilling the Commission's wishes. I will spare the blushes of those from the unionist parties who were on the Commission at that time. None of them said that flags should be dealt with by the Commission, only by the Commission and that that was what it was for. So what has changed in the meantime? We have got no explanation here today.

We have had a petition of concern on whether there should be open debate. Mr Poots was here, having taken time out of his very busy schedule as Health Minister to come to the debate, which is amazing in itself, although I notice that he is now absent. This time last week, Edwin Poots said that the petition of concern was abused. This week, we have the DUP, quite shamefacedly, using a petition of concern because it suits its very narrow grounds. *[Interruption.]* I pointed out last week — Mr McCrea is speaking from a sedentary position.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: Last week, I pointed out that we would be prepared to have an open discussion about the use of the petition of concern. It was used last week because there was an equality issue. This week, it is not being used for an equality issue. It is being used to run away from a decision, already taken by the Commission, that the matter should be dealt with as a political issue by the Assembly and, by extension, an ad hoc Committee.

When Mr Poots was speaking, there were great cheers from his colleagues. Indeed, the Chair of the Committee for Education, who is now absent, said that Caitríona Ruane brought legislation through the Assembly. She has not brought one piece of legislation through the Assembly as far as I am aware. Getting up and, if you like, flag-waving — dare I use that expression during this debate — to get a cheap cheer from the crowd does not serve the debate very well.

Again, it was great to see Nelson McCausland, a Minister who has a very heavy schedule and runs a very important Department, having time out to come to the debate. Many will ask whether all Executive Ministers have time to make contributions when there are 38 other Members in their parties, or are the big flag-wavers being brought out this afternoon? It was obvious from the Minister's contribution,

and I have absolutely no doubt, that he was asked at the last minute — over lunchtime, perhaps — to drop in. Apart from his contribution being a series of incoherent points, the Minister was even prepared to use the death of an individual to score a very cheap and base point. He did not care who he used to do that. When we hear speeches about concern for victims and the tragedy of the past 40 years, it rings hollow when Members come to the Chamber and use anything and any opportunity to score a very base political point. I say directly to that Minister: shame on you for doing that.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: Yes. I will give way.

3.30 pm

Mr McCausland: Somehow, it is all right for Ministers from Sinn Féin to turn up at Irish republican commemorations and eulogise and glorify Irish republican killers, but it is wrong for anyone else to refer to the victims of the people whom they eulogise.

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

Mr McCartney: I thought that you were going to say — it would have been an interesting point — that maybe they had time to do that rather than fulfil their ministries. I note that you made no defence. You should be in your office; you should be running your Department — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to finish.

Mr McCartney: You should be running your Department and dealing with the issues that affect people's lives every day instead of running in here with a big flag and waving it at people — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr McCartney: I want to return to the topic of the debate: the need for an Ad Hoc Committee.

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

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr McCartney: I will make a final point. Perhaps I will get another cheer from the other side, which I hope that Hansard will record. No one should fear discussion.

Mr Weir: I cannot let go the remarks of the Member who spoke previously. Obviously, shame on a Minister for appearing in the Assembly in this debate rather than at a terrorist commemoration. Shame on that Minister for appearing in this Assembly debate. That is the level of hypocrisy from the other side.

I will deal with a few points that have been raised and explain why this is an unnecessary motion. As, I think, Tom Elliott pointed out, there a mechanism to deal with this: it is called the Assembly Commission. That is why a motion was legitimately tabled, dealt with and passed. Indeed, we managed to reach a situation in which —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr McCartney: Previously, the Commission agreed:

"that the flags issue is a political matter best handled by the Assembly."

Talk to your member on the Commission from that time and tell them that they were wrong.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Weir: The Member opposite can quote from 11 years ago. However, some of the Members opposite have a very short memory. The motion also deals with an Ad Hoc Committee for emblems and language policy. I am sure that this is no secret that I am revealing: this Thursday, when the Assembly Commission meeting takes place, there is an item on the agenda to deal with a draft language policy. Are we told that that is not a legitimate level of discussion for the Assembly Commission? Perhaps that should simply be put to an Ad Hoc Committee, as suggested. I wonder whether the Member opposite, as she has done on three previous occasions, will adopt some sort of hokey-cokey approach.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No. Quite frankly, I have heard enough from the honourable Member for South Down today.

Ms Ruane: You are afraid to debate.

Mr Weir: The Member says that we are afraid to debate. However, on the past three occasions when these very issues could have been debated in the Assembly Commission, she has been missing. The old line of running away seems to be particularly applicable today to the Member.

Flags, emblems and language are all matters that are being dealt with and have been dealt with by the Commission. In the past 12 months, we have been looking at the issue of emblems. As was indicated, we have had a number of sessions on language policy, and, indeed, we will look at that again this Thursday. As was indicated, provision has been made, and when there is genuine demand, that has been met.

I am grateful to one of the Members opposite who highlighted that, when a group makes a request to have a tour in Irish, that will be catered for. However, that is on the basis of demand. It is not on the basis of unnecessary expense for a political purpose. The great tidal wave of greater interest in the Irish language does not appear to be borne out by issues that were raised in the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure this week.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I am surprised to hear some of the Members across the way eulogising community support for the Irish language.

Last week, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure was advised that a state-funded newspaper, 25% of which was funded by our Government and 75% by the Government of the Irish Republic, needed figures of 6,000 copies to be sold to break even. The peak that it reached was 1,500 copies. Frankly, €1.6 million for a publication that never left the dock is something that should be investigated by the House and by the Oireachtas in Dublin.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for that information. The reality is that the provision of services should be on the basis of need and not on the basis of political vanity projects that some of the Members opposite want to put in place.

At the heart of this, supposedly, is the establishment of an Ad Hoc Committee. I have no problem with dealing with what needs to be dealt with in Parliament Buildings through the Assembly Commission. I think that there is a wider argument for work to be done by the party leaders to try to improve community relations. However, does anybody in this House genuinely believe that, if a six-, eight- or 10-week Ad hoc Committee deals with this issue through 11 Back-Bench Members, it will not generate more heat than light? We are going to be left with a situation, which, if anything, simply entrenches positions. That is one of my criticisms of an Ad Hoc Committee. I do not see any particular value coming from an Ad Hoc Committee; it would simply waste people's time and generate a greater degree of anger.

One of the other false assumptions that seems to lie at the heart of this is that Northern Ireland is some sort of condominium that is somewhere between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Indeed, one Member who is present said to me not that long ago that I may think that I am British, but that she knows that she is in Ireland. The reality — there has got to be a bit of a reality check among some of the Members opposite — is that the consent principle means that you are part of the United Kingdom. That needs to be reflected in the Chamber as much as anything else.

In conclusion, genuine debate can be had in the Assembly Commission about what the Building looks like and how we accommodate people in relation to that. We can never go down the line — I will certainly never permit it — of turning this from a Building that seems to be open to everyone and that draws groups from all sections of the community into something that is a cold house for many people in this community.

I first got involved in politics in the students' union at Queen's University. It was marked out by an aggressive Irish-language policy, and, for many years, it sent out a strong signal that the students' union and Queen's in general was not somewhere that was welcoming to the unionist community. That created a chill factor and a factor that said that one community need not attend. The reality is that there are some in the Chamber who would be happy for that to be replicated across Stormont. We have a Building that is welcoming to everyone. I believe that an Ad Hoc Committee is unnecessary.

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

Mr Weir: Instead of running away from the Commission, I urge Members to attend it and to debate the issues where they should be debated. I urge Members to reject the motion.

Mr G Robinson: At the commencement of my contribution, let me make it clear that I am proud citizen of the United Kingdom. As such, I firmly believe that our nation's flag — the Union flag — should fly on all public buildings in Northern Ireland, including this Building. However, recent events have shown the world that some parties have demonised the Union flag while promoting the flying of a foreign flag. That is called hypocrisy.

I am saddened that our country's flag does not have its rightful permanent place flying over this Building. Yes — 365 days of the year. I also include in that British emblems and symbols that are housed in this Building.

In this Building, Ministers, regardless of what party they come from, carry out British parliamentary-style procedures and decide on local changes to British laws. That proposed legislation requires Royal Assent to become law, yet we cannot fly the national flag over the Assembly Building on a permanent basis. It saddens me that, although British rule and law is administered in this Building, the national flag is flown only on designated days to pander to the needs of some parties who want to achieve nothing else but the removal of a legitimate emblem of the United Kingdom.

As a unionist, I am not blind to the fact that this motion is a cynical attempt to hide the moves in Belfast City Hall and some other council-owned buildings throughout Northern Ireland. In my council in Limavady, the Union flag and other symbols, even a mug belonging to Princess Diana, were removed by the republican/nationalist bloc a few years ago, and that has caused great resentment in the unionist community ever since. Members should also remember the indefensible violent response that their actions in December provoked in the wider unionist community.

In my experience, people of all religious and political beliefs do not have a major problem with the flying of the Union flag, but they are perturbed that it has become a political football for the enemies of Ulster. I believe that it is a great sadness that a Committee such as the motion proposes is even mentioned, and I am sure that Members will understand why I cannot and will not support the motion. The Assembly Commission is the place where this topic needs to be debated.

Mr Lyttle: I certainly had hoped that the debate would be constructive, but I have to say that some of the disrespect that has been shown by DUP Members has been quite startling to many who contributed.

I sat as Chair of the — Would you let me speak? Please? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard. Continue.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you Mr Speaker.

I sat as Chair of the Assembly Business Trust last night with young directors from all across Northern Ireland, and one common, recurring question was why the economy is not top of our agenda and why we have not managed to deal with these types of issues and settle them. I think that it is clear by some Members' attitudes why it has been so difficult.

I will try to keep my comments as balanced and factual as possible, as I am acutely aware that the majority of people in Northern Ireland want to see leadership and solutions on these issues. The lack of leadership around flags and emblems has had brutal human and economic consequences for people and businesses across Northern Ireland in recent months. Unfortunately, this is a symptom of a wider issue of an incomplete peace process and a lack of delivery from the First Minister and deputy First Minister on an Executive regional shared future strategy for Northern Ireland, which they have now had over five years in office to deliver.

I believe firmly that having designated days is a balanced, mutually respectful and sustainable way to display the flag that represents the current constitutional status of this region. It not only reflects the constitutional status but respects that it does not represent the only national identity in Northern Ireland. This has been a longstanding position of the Alliance Party, which has been completely independent of other parties' positions. When required to show courage in standing for this shared future policy, we have done so to the point of death threat and intimidation at our homes and workplaces.

It is perhaps important and useful to note that a recent poll found that 44% of people surveyed across Northern Ireland believed that designated days is the best policy for the respectful display of flags in our community.

We need mature and responsible leadership on these issues. As hard to believe as it may be,

parties in this House have previously shown leadership on the issue. In response to the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000, which governed the display of the Union flag on government buildings, the Ulster Unionist Party said that by accepting the:

"legitimate expression of British identity through the flying of the flag on the 17 [flag-flying] days ... the SDLP and Sinn Féin will be honoring their obligation in the Belfast Agreement to show 'sensitivity' and 'promote mutual respect' rather than division."

So, I am happy to give way and allow the Ulster Unionist Party Members to explain their dramatic U-turn that they made in their contributions earlier today on this clear policy. They may wish to do that and/or to clarify what seemed to be their advocating of flying the flag at Parliament Buildings on designated days.

That —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Certainly.

Mrs D Kelly: Would it surprise the Member to learn that many members of the Ulster Unionist Party in councils across the North of Ireland have supported flag-flying on designated days in local authority buildings?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for her contribution, and, indeed, I am trying to make the point that parties have shown leadership in putting forward balanced and respectful policies on these sensitive issues. I gave the Ulster Unionist Party an opportunity to clarify what its currently mixed policy position is on the issue. Its Members have not taken that opportunity. That, however, is perhaps no great surprise.

Unfortunately, for some reason, parties have U-turned on their positions, so instead we have had systematic campaigns of misrepresentation and intimidation that seem to continue to this day. I believe that this is a morally bankrupt politics of fear. I believe that the Northern Ireland public want to see positive politics that inspires and reassures people that they have a place in Northern Ireland.

I am willing to engage with anyone's legitimate concerns, and I will robustly test the motivation of other parties, but we must send out a clear message that there is nothing to fear from compromising and forming Ad Hoc Committees

that allow us to look at these issues in a political manner. Given that the role of the Assembly Commission is to be impartial and not to act on behalf of political parties, the fact is that inequalities and fears over identity will never be addressed in the absence of engagement and the delivery of a shared future.

I believe that a balanced and positive expression of identity should be the aim of the Assembly and of Northern Ireland. Peace is the only way that we will lift communities out of disadvantage and into regeneration and economic growth, and to have designated days is a flags policy that is in line with the Belfast Agreement, and one that will give us the platform to move on the delivery of those economic issues.

3.45 pm

It is not neutrality. It is not joint authority, which I cannot imagine Sinn Féin or the SDLP wanting to see in a new united Ireland, for example. It is a balanced and respectful reflection of the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

We have gone further than just resting on those issues. We have published a shared future strategy and put forward the constructive suggestion of a shared future reference group, which would have elected representatives working with civic society. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister seem to have declined that constructive suggestion. Two years after the initial draft of the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy —

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

Mr Lyttle: — it is clear that the Assembly needs to do much more to deal with the issues and to allow us to build the shared and better future that we want for Northern Ireland.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I did not intend to speak to the motion, but I have been following the debate while being involved in other business about the Building.

We are discussing a proposal to establish an Ad Hoc Committee — a proposal that, amazingly, attracted a petition of concern. We are talking about an Ad Hoc Committee here. It is that reaction — in my view, with respect, an overreaction — that we should really focus on.

I listened to the contributions, and some Members appear to have difficulty addressing the role and purpose of the Ad Hoc Committee or, indeed, the reasons that the proposition emerged. It was proposed not least to resolve a flags protocol but also to avoid contaminating or polluting the role of the Commission, which is meant to be a neutral body that oversees the —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Yes, OK.

Mr Allister: Is not the real reason that the motion was proposed because if the matter stays within the Assembly Commission, its decisions are unchallengeable by a petition of concern? Sinn Féin fears democracy in the Assembly Commission, so it wants to put the matter into an Ad Hoc Committee, the decisions of which, if it loses in that debate, can be blocked by a petition of concern. Is that not the real truth of what Sinn Féin is at?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Thank you very much. I suppose that inadvertently, because I am not sure that he was intending to support my argument, Mr Allister has actually proved my argument. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: By taking the matter into the Commission, with its inbuilt majority and its different means of arriving at decisions, in fact what we see is an attempt to impose a unionist proposal on the entire Assembly. I want to go back to the origins of this — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I think that many of the Members who spoke completely overlooked this particular important point. There was sufficient notice for people to have thought their way into the proposition when it was initially brought to the attention of Belfast City Council, over a year ago now. As it went through the various mechanisms, people had plenty of time to consider their options. The option that was eventually selected was not Sinn Féin's preference but a compromise position. I wonder why unionists, who, all along, had accepted the designated-days formula for here, did not give a credible

explanation of why they needed a 365-days policy or why they did not move before the Alliance Party moved to the idea —

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. So that he is left in absolutely no doubt, the leader of the Sinn Féin group in the City Hall made it very clear — it was streamed, so anyone can watch it — that Sinn Féin's voting to place the flag on the pole on designated days was a tactical move. It was nothing to do with any policy or principle: it was a tactical move. Let us have consistency in the message. Let us have no spin when you are misleading the House.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I reject any allegation that I am misleading the House. I am speaking to the record, and I pose the question that you also avoided: why did it not occur to unionists that there was an available compromise? We could have avoided all the division, all the schisms, all the disturbances and all the disruption that we have had since.

Is there no flexibility, no imagination, no creativity?

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: OK, Trevor.

Mr Clarke: How can the Member suggest a compromise from 365 days down to 18, given that the majority of Northern Ireland — 56% of the population — is from the unionist persuasion? How is that a compromise?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I harbour the hope and the expectation that unionists, whatever the position — and I will accept, for the sake of the proposition, 54%. What responsibility are they going to show for the 46% of people who have a different perspective? That is what this comes down to; that is the nub of it. Three hundred and sixty five days of flying the Union flag did not acknowledge that there was any other diversity, any other opinion or any other allegiances in our society. That was a proposal and a policy that should, and must, be challenged wherever it appears.

Even at this late hour — and I know that there is a petition of concern in relation to this — the idea of taking this into the Commission, with its inbuilt unionist majority, is simply digging the hole deeper. The hole is deep enough as it is. There was an available compromise, which you ignored.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go ahead, Colum.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member is a former member of Derry City Council, and one of his former colleagues is Mr Gregory Campbell. No flag flies on that council building. Does the Member think for one second that Mr Campbell feels any less British every time he walks through the halls of the Guildhall?

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I suppose that it would be something to look forward to if we had an acknowledgement from Mr Campbell, but we will not get that today either, I expect.

I want to finish on this point, because I am running out of time. It is important that we recognise that there is more than one tradition and more than one aspiration in this community, and we represent them all. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: In introducing the debate, Ms Ruane read excerpts from the Good Friday Agreement. She and a number of other contributors acknowledged the requirements to promote equality, parity of esteem and good relations, and recognised the diversity that makes up the modern Northern Ireland. I, too, wish to refer to a previous document, which is the definition, if you like, or the mission statement by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland:

"Our vision for Northern Ireland is of a peaceful society in which everyone can freely and fully participate, achieve their full potential, and live free from poverty. We want a fair and effective system of government, underpinned by rights that are guaranteed for all, and responsibilities that all must share. We wish to support dialogue, and to foster mutual understanding and respect for diversity."

I have to say that the debate, and the contributions of many Members this afternoon, does not fulfil those aspirations. As a mother of four — my youngest daughter is 19 and my eldest 28 — I, like many other parents across the North, despair at today's debate in light of the continuing job losses in this region.

In his contribution, Mr Lyttle told us how the young directors asked last night why the economy is not at the heart of debate today. It

is because of a number of reasons. At the beginning of this Assembly term, the First Minister said that the Assembly and the Executive would be judged on delivery over the next four years. Almost two years into this term, what has been delivered? Again, we are debating flags and emblems, and the methodology of dealing with it in an Ad Hoc Committee was precisely because, as Mr Lyttle and others pointed out —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Not yet. The failure of many — of OFMDFM — in actually producing a cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: Many Members have rightly highlighted that the work of the Committee is not about the politics of flags and emblems. It is the work of all of us, but most especially those in leadership positions around the Executive table.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will not give way just yet, but I will do so during the course of the debate.

We need to take a step or two back. Why are we having this debate today at this time, when the recession is still biting and when job losses are continuing to increase? We are having this debate because Peter Robinson never got over losing the East Belfast seat to Naomi Long. Mr Speaker, 40,000 leaflets were issued across Belfast — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order

Mrs D Kelly: — because of Peter Robinson's failure to win that seat. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: That brought protestors and violence onto the streets of the North, and 152 police officers were injured. Did Peter Robinson show a lead by standing by Martin McGuinness's side to condemn that violence? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: No, he did not. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: The boys in the playground opposite have yet to tell —

Mr Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not persist. It is quite obvious that the Member does not want to give way at this minute in time. *[Interruption.]* Order. Allow the Member to continue.

Mrs D Kelly: The boys across the way are going to have to listen for once in their lives. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: Mr Speaker, many Members have referred to the Good Friday Agreement. I was filled with dismay to hear Gregory Campbell say that it is a redundant document. Shame on him. He is deluding himself and the people whom he represents, because the DUP's very presence in this Chamber acknowledges the institutions that were set up under the Good Friday Agreement. This place would not be in existence were it not for the DUP's tacit engagement with and participation in the institutions.

The Good Friday Agreement was amended by the DUP, in cahoots with the British and Irish Governments and, to some extent, Sinn Féin, to get the St Andrews Agreement. So, de facto, through the very presence and reality of the St Andrews Agreement, the DUP has accepted the Good Friday Agreement. It is about time that Peter Robinson and those in the leadership positions of the DUP told their Back-Benchers what that means. It means parity of esteem. It means equality. It means —

Mr Speaker: Order. I said earlier in the debate that it is important that Members, in whatever they say, link their words to the original motion. I am listening to the Member as she sums up. It is important that we try to come back to the motion as far as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: The reason why I referred specifically to the Good Friday Agreement is the failure and contributions of many Members opposite. They are deluding themselves and the communities that they represent. The Good Friday Agreement exists and is here to stay, so get over it. Get over it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: No, I will not give way just yet. There is plenty of time for that. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members should not persist.

Mrs D Kelly: A number of contributors talked about the position of the Assembly Commission. We, as an Assembly, ought to protect the Commission's position and authority and its roles and responsibilities. We should not put an issue as toxic as flags and emblems into that forum. There are other forums already in existence to deal with that agenda item. There is the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy and the First Minister and deputy First Minister's sitting with their colleagues around the Executive table.

As other Members have pointed out, it is very disheartening that, when Ministers have spoken as ordinary Assembly Members —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I want to make this point.

I defend Ministers' right to do so. Nonetheless, they are working the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement in their ministerial positions. That is what they are doing. They are Ministers under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement.

I will give way.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way eventually.

You referred to parity of esteem. Will you refer to parity of esteem in respect of your colleague sitting behind you, who carried the coffin of a paramilitary ex-terrorist, terrorist or whatever you wish to call him; the naming of a park after a terrorist — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Clarke: — and the continual campaign in respect of —

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must be heard.

Mr Clarke: — the freeing of Marian Price and Gerry McGeough?

4.00 pm

Mrs D Kelly: The Member opposite did not use the example of John Hume, who said that you

cannot eat a flag. As he well knows, that is a reality for many people today, with child poverty increasing in this area — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: Child poverty in this region is among the highest. Mr Speaker, are my constituency offices a place apart from the constituency offices of Members opposite? We have people coming in because there is not enough social housing available to them; people are losing their jobs and their benefits are being removed. I hear shouting from the background. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: One of the points that I wish to make is that part of the issue around this is that there has been a failure to deal not only with building a shared future, but with the past. The SDLP has always called for that and said that we must deal with the past on an ethical and moral basis. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mrs D Kelly: We are not afraid of that. We are up for that challenge, and I hope that other parties will stand with us.

Mr McCausland: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I have finished, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the vote will be on a cross-community basis.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 46.

AYES

NATIONALIST:

Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Dallat, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill,

Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

OTHER:

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Eastwood and Ms Ruane.

NOES

UNIONIST:

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson.

<i>Total Votes</i>	<i>94</i>	<i>Total Ayes</i>	<i>48</i>	<i>[51.1%]</i>
<i>Nationalist Votes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>Nationalist Ayes</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>
<i>Unionist Votes</i>	<i>46</i>	<i>Unionist Ayes</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>[0.0%]</i>
<i>Other Votes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>Other Ayes</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>[100.0%]</i>

The following Member voted in both Lobbies and is therefore not counted in the result: Mr Agnew.

Question accordingly negatived (cross-community vote).

Education: Entitlement Framework Funding and Strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is the motion on the — order, Members — entitlement framework funding and strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. I ask Members to leave the Chamber quietly. I ask the Clerk to read the motion. *[Interruption.]*

4.15 pm

Mr Gardiner: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, please ask the Clerk to read the motion again. There was so much noise, and it did not deliver down here. It was not his fault but that of Members making such an uproar going out. If he could read it again, I would very much appreciate it.

Mr Speaker: The wording is on the Order Paper. I apologise to the Member and to other Members who are not hearing the proceedings. There may be an issue around that, which we will look at. I appreciate what the Member is saying.

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in light of recommendation 9 of the review of the common funding scheme and the concerns being expressed by schools and further education colleges, calls on the Minister of Education to extend the funding earmarked for the entitlement framework to the 2013-14 and 2014-15 financial years; and further calls on the Minister of Education to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, a common funding approach for all pupils and students within a coherent strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds.

In moving the motion, I acknowledge the announcement that the Minister of Education made last week on the provision of an additional £9.9 million to assist schools in the fulfilment of their obligations under the entitlement framework. The Minister will have to excuse my suspicion that this announcement may have some connection with this debate. It will not have escaped the Assembly's attention that, when a motion on education is tabled by

the DUP, a ministerial statement or an announcement on the matter is issued shortly before the debate. No doubt, he will deny it, and if it had happened once, I would not have thought any more of it. However, when these coincidences keep occurring, such as with debates tabled on GCSEs and school leadership, it becomes increasingly hard to ignore. To misquote Oscar Wilde: to issue one statement may be regarded as misfortune, to issue two looks like carelessness, but to issue three looks like implementing DUP policy. In fact, I am tempted to table a motion on academic selection to see whether the Minister will be spurred into action.

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

Despite the Minister's announcement, there is still plenty to debate. The key objective of the entitlement framework is to improve equality of access for all young people, regardless of where they live or the sector in which they are educated to a broadly balanced and more economically relevant curriculum with clear progression pathways. This motion was tabled after it became clear from the Minister's savings delivery plan that, in 2013-14, only £5.2 million would be available to schools to meet the requirements under the entitlement framework and that, in 2014-15, that would reduce to nothing. To put this into context: schools were provided with £11.3 million in 2011-12. This has the potential to cause massive problems for schools and eat into their already stretched delegated schools budgets. Even following the Minister's announcement, schools are to receive £8.2 million in 2013-14 and £6.9 million the following year, which may be difficult to manage. This money is required to ensure that schools comply with their obligations under the entitlement framework, which means that a school must offer a minimum number of subjects at Key Stage 4 and post-16. It was recognised in the Salisbury report, which was published last month, that schools were struggling financially to meet those obligations, and as a result of this, recommendation 9 of his report suggested:

"To allow schools to fulfil the requirements of the Entitlement Framework in the short to medium term, the Department of Education should consider extending earmarked entitlement framework funding at its current level for the 2013/14 and 2014/15 financial years."

Unfortunately, despite an announcement that sounds so pleased with itself, the amounts on offer still fall very short of what was

recommended by the Salisbury report and, I must presume, of what is required for schools to meet their statutory requirements. It is unfortunate that the announcement was not made earlier, as many schools may have already finished their curriculum for next year, to allow young people and their parents to make informed choices about their future.

The situation throws up a number of questions that I would like the Minister to answer. What has persuaded the Minister that the amount that he has announced is sufficient to cover the needs that are identified in the Salisbury report, which recommended maintaining funding at its current level rather than reducing it?

What will happen to schools that are unable to meet their statutory obligations due to decreased funding? If the schools have been unable to complete the transaction up to this point, can they be expected to do so within the next two years? Does the Minister have a contingency plan? A further question that I would like the Minister to address is: can we be satisfied that the entitlement framework is a suitable model for schools?

I will move on to the thorny issue of a coherent strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds. I can only call it "thorny", because there seems to have been a U-turn away from the policy of the previous Sinn Féin Minister of Education on this matter. A 2009 letter from Caitríona Ruane advised us that a working group on qualifications at 14-19 had been established in September 2008, with a commitment to work closely with the Department for Employment and Learning to further develop a 14-19 strategy. The Department's website says:

"The Department of Education ... and the Department for Employment and Learning ... are working conjointly to bring forward a co-ordinated programme of provision for 14-19 year olds."

However, when is a strategy not a strategy? When it is a "co-ordinated programme of provision", because in January this year the current Minister wrote to the Education Committee stating:

"I would like to clarify that the Department has no plans to publish a 14 to 19 education strategy."

So, in the context of the entitlement framework, it would make enormous sense to publish such a strategy. It would provide the structure to allow a joined-up approach to ensure that

pupils' individual needs are met. The current funding structure does not allow a sufficient crossover. Although the independent panel behind the Salisbury report would prefer to see a school estate that could offer the breadth of courses that are specified in the entitlement framework, there is an admission that this cannot be an immediate reality and that such a change to the school estate could take some considerable time.

The reality is, therefore, that further education colleges, which fall under the Minister for Employment and Learning's remit, with their state-of-the-art facilities and specialist lecturers, are best placed to offer many of those courses. It appears inconceivable in the light of that reality that a strategy is no longer contemplated. Such a strategy could provide a means of giving protection to rural schools in the light of the reduction in funding, and it is those schools, which this Assembly has recognised on numerous occasions as important to rural communities, that potentially struggle most under the entitlement framework where transport costs, pupil numbers and the cost of provision of subjects are concerned.

The strategy could also look at small sixth forms. It is recognised by the independent panel, and generally accepted, that there are too many small sixth forms. However, will it be possible to operate large sixth forms without the excessive use of transport in rural areas? Given the reduction in funding, can those sixth forms continue, and what impact will that have on those rural communities? Conjoined thinking and a clear strategy could help not only in addressing the problems but in dealing with the fears of schools and pupils.

The disparity in costs of the provision of subjects between schools and further education colleges could also be addressed. The panel also noted that issue. The panel recommends that the Department of Education considers, with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), the potential for joint funding arrangements for all 16- to 19-year-olds. I feel that this does not go far enough, and such arrangements should be considered for all 14- to 19-year-olds as part of a 14-19 strategy.

Sadly, the panel chose not to allocate additional funding for the provision of applied or vocational courses for fear that it may encourage further duplication of provision and, in particular, encourage schools to replicate the specialist provision of further education colleges. However, a strategy may well address some of those issues.

Such a strategy could also address issues on special educational needs (SEN) provision. The SEN framework, operated by the Department of Education (DE), makes schools and the education and library boards responsible for identifying, assessing and making provision for pupils with special educational needs up to the age of 16. That is the situation unless that pupil has a statement of SEN, in which case the statement can then be maintained until the end of the academic year when the young person reaches 19 years of age. A smooth transition is required when that young person leaves the school system and becomes the responsibility of DEL from age 16 onwards, and a coherent strategy could deal with that. Furthermore, the needs that should be addressed while such young people are availing themselves of services at further education colleges as a result of the entitlement framework could also form part of that combined strategy.

Will the Minister once again clarify whether there will be a strategy arising out of the co-ordinated programme provision between DE and DEL? Will he advise what happened between the 2009 letter of his predecessor and his letter of January 2013 that resulted in the decision not to progress with the conjoined strategy? Will he provide more detail on the working group referred to by his predecessor and advise when the group ceased meeting and what happened to its recommendation?

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

Miss M McIlveen: At present, there is no clear direction of GCSE and GCE, and we have talked before about clear pathways. We need to be aware of the requirements of the workforce, the economy and universities, and whether we are meeting those requirements. That should form part of the basis of a coherent strategy, and currently we are seeing little evidence —

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

Miss M McIlveen: — of joined-up thinking between DE and DEL to deliver real outcomes.

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

Miss M McIlveen: That situation needs to change.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Members opposite for bringing the motion to the House.

I commend the Education Minister for announcing a further £9.9 million to extend the entitlement framework support funding in 2014-15. As the Member opposite said, it will help ensure that schools deliver a wide range of courses applicable to each student's ability and needs going into Key Stage 4 and post-16. Regardless of what school or background they come from, pupils will have the same access to the opportunities presented by an increased number of courses.

Young people need to be equipped with the relevant knowledge that will help them with the skills that they need to compete for apprenticeships and other jobs. They need to be provided with the same support to give them the confidence, skills and experience to compete in the labour market.

The 18 new courses at Key Stage 4 for 2013-14, moving towards 24 courses in 2015-16, and the 21 courses for post-16 for 2013-14, moving towards 27 courses in 2015-16, will help maximise and improve educational attainment, which is vital to helping build a world-class skills base here. Skills have the potential to transform lives by transforming life chances and driving social mobility. However, I believe that schools need to have robust, well-informed careers information and guidance, as that is critical to successful progression pathways.

I have spoken with many young people in my constituency who say that they made the wrong choices in the courses that they took owing to the lack of good advice and information on the subject and where it would lead them and on whether the courses were required for entry to certain other courses and colleges. Schools' careers advisers and external advisers should work in partnership with one another, pupils, parents and those with parental responsibility.

I am aware that a number of partnership agreements are in place with careers teams and schools. However, how is that working and how is it being benchmarked? How do we know that it is working to the advantage of the pupils? It is widely researched that good careers advice will help reduce drop-out levels in further and higher education courses and training.

Our economy demands a flexible and skilled workforce fit for the 21st century. I urge both Ministers and their respective Departments — DE and DEL — to re-evaluate the guidance given to Key Stage 4 and post-16 pupils to ensure that the courses are matched to the needs of the labour market and, in particular, within sectors of growth for the economy so that

pupils can make informed choices to suit their ability and needs, know that the courses that they undertake are the right ones for them and be aware of what is available to them.

Area-learning communities assist schools in reducing their costs, and they share expertise. I believe that that is good practice. I, along with other members of the Education Committee, had the privilege of attending one such area-learning community in Limavady, where schools from different sectors come together to share classes and courses. Not only are the children getting the opportunity to work in partnership, but they are also working educationally across the religious divide.

4.30 pm

The Department does not allocate specific funding for area-learning communities but to the schools within them under the local management of the schools. I would like to hear from the Minister how many schools in the North are actively participating in area-learning communities. I believe that schools working collectively offer more choice to young people and open up wider opportunities for them going into employment.

That highlights the need for closer co-operation and collaboration between both Ministers in the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education in order to explore a common approach for all pupils aged 14 to 19, as further education has a key role to play in opening up access to higher-level skills to individuals from backgrounds with historically lower rates of participation. I support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I, too, welcome the motion. I especially welcome the call to extend the funding earmarked for the entitlement framework and the call to formulate a common funding approach for all pupils and students within a coherent 14-19 strategy. Those are two very good points, but it is sad that today's debate has been undermined by the announcement last week. Yet, I welcome the £3 million and £6.5 million that are being offered to help out with the payment of making the entitlement framework work. It is extremely welcome, but it makes me wonder whether the two parties are working well together and playing off on each other, or is it just good politics? I would like to think that it is the latter.

On the one hand, it is good news, but it is too late for many schools that have already planned their cuts. My colleague Jo-Anne Dobson will

go into that a bit more in a few minutes. We welcome the entitlement framework and the breadth of its subjects, but we struggle to understand how it fits in with all the other changes that are being put into education.

To be able to afford the entitlement framework, we need large schools, which, at the moment, we do not have that many of, and we probably will not have in the future. Depending on what happens in this thing, we may not have the scale of those schools in the future. So, we do need funding; not just short term for the next two or three years, but a dynamic system of putting funding in place well into the future.

On the other hand, it could mean that we need to cause schools to share skills better, and to share facilities. That, of course, is welcome, especially in line with the Ulster Unionist policy of trying to achieve a single, shared education system into the future.

We recently saw in an answer to a question from me that the area-learning communities cost some £10.7 million a year, with just over £1 million being spent in Newry and Mourne and just £90,000 being spent in south-west Belfast. That is not to say that one is better than the other, but it shows how diverse the use of funding is in pushing the area-learning communities towards helping each other. We like the idea, and we like the broad curricula, but we do not want to see it being used for the comprehensivisation of our schools or taking away from achieving shared education.

With so much change ongoing, we need more dynamic funding. As I have said, we know that Sinn Féin wants the comprehensivisation of all schools. That means large schools and a broad entitlement framework, but we must take care that we are not sleepwalking into something that most of us do not want.

The second part of the motion calls for a common funding approach and a coherent strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds. I ask the Minister whether he has put someone in charge of pulling together all those points. Some extremely good points were made by the proposer. We need a coherent strategy, and we long to see Northern Ireland not just as the powerhouse of the UK or Europe, but actually producing people for the whole world. It does need someone to pull it all together.

This entitlement framework is one area where we are drifting like a rudderless ship in a sea of far too many changes, especially where there is a lack of an agreed cross-party way forward. So, once again, I call on the Minister to work

with other parties to produce that long-term way forward. The spirit of the Belfast Agreement was consensus and not this deal-or-no-deal sort of system that we have.

The House and all of us pulling together can do much better, so I welcome the motion. Many of the symptoms within it, though, concern me. I may be wrong, but let us see our whole education system being pulled together. I support the motion.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion but am disappointed that the SDLP amendment, which put a stronger emphasis on the necessity for a 14 to 19 education strategy, was not accepted, although I accept that the idea of "a coherent strategy" is mentioned in the motion.

I welcome the extra funding to ensure the delivery of the entitlement framework, albeit that it is insufficient to meet the Salisbury requirements. However, where is the strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds' education? That is essential if we are to meet the needs of our young people and our economy, by offering them, wherever they go to school, a wide and better-balanced range of courses that are relevant to their needs, aptitudes, interests and their job prospects. Every pupil is different and choices should reflect each young person's interests and aspirations.

Many young people — and, indeed, parents — underestimate the importance of choice at the end of Key Stage 3, a choice that may significantly impact on their careers. What do you say to a person in their late teens who has insufficient science or foreign language experience to pursue a particular course of study?

High-quality careers education, information and guidance are essential during Key Stage 3 and right through their time at school so that they can make an informed choice, leading to the most appropriate route for them. It is about schools, as well as young people and their parents, having high aspirations and then achieving them.

The entitlement framework gives young people the opportunity at the age of 14 and 16 to pursue different pathways, in their own or other schools or in further education colleges. Many students choose the traditional route with the same school from the age of 11 to 16 or 11 to 18, but I have seen the real benefits of the flexibility that entitlement framework funding creates in my constituency in the Downpatrick and Newry and Mourne learning partnerships.

When a young person is engaged in their own learning and can see the relevance of what they are doing in school and college and what the progression pathways can lead to for their future, they are more likely to achieve and focus in the short- and long term, and more likely to progress into higher education, training or employment.

I was particularly impressed on a recent visit to the South Eastern Regional College, Downpatrick, when I observed three groups who took an alternative route post-16: a pet care course that young people were using as preparation for pursuing a course in veterinary nursing or equine studies; an ICT course that at the end of two years provided them with the necessary skills and qualifications to enter the world of work or third-level study; or a hair and beauty course that gave them the skills to set up their own business or enter the hotel leisure industry. Those young people knew why they were doing their respective courses and had their plans well mapped out. It is important to mention that further education (FE) colleges feel left out of the area-based planning process.

The entitlement framework and associated funding has many other benefits, including opportunities for shared education and helping the transition from school to third-level study. Having to go to another school or college helps to build independent living skills that are essential at third level.

It is important that parents are encouraged to aspire to a better education and future for their children. Parental involvement and encouragement, no matter how small, can have a direct and long-term effect on a child's educational achievement. It must be made clear to parents that, no matter what your background, your child can achieve educationally and improve life. That real parental engagement is needed through the strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Young people with special educational needs need to have the same opportunities within the 14 to 19 curriculum, whether they decide to stay on at school or attend a further education college. I was assured by the Minister this morning that rurality will be an important factor as we plan. A Member said earlier that this entitlement framework and the curriculum strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds is an important aspect to maintaining rural schools.

In conclusion, I support the motion. It is about quality and coherence of provision through a 14-19 education strategy that meets the needs

of all our young people and properly prepares them for a life of work in the 21st century.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion. Before I continue, I must say that I was utterly enchanted by Michelle McIlveen's introduction to the debate. I am sure that Oscar Wilde is up there somewhere having a quiet smile. He probably would have used the same words himself.

Michelle referred to the coincidence of the Minister pre-empting the debate by announcing a funding increase in advance of it. It must be the first time a Minister has dealt with half of a motion without getting to his feet. If a motion comes forward from the Alliance Party looking for a 200% increase in funding for integrated schools, it will be pure coincidence.

Because the Minister has so adequately dealt with the first half of the motion, I will speak on the second point on common funding and the needs of 14- to 19-year-olds. Obviously, I support that part of the motion. There is a recognised and significant problem here. Too often, as we all know, 16- to 19-year-olds in particular are perceived to fall between the cracks and out of the system. Although that is beginning to change, there is still a lot of work to do.

The motion refers to a "coherent strategy"; I would perhaps use the word "flexible" but we can use both. We need a flexible strategy that provides real choice and flexibility of movement, post 16, between schools and further education colleges. Such a strategy could usefully tie in with existing education strategies, such as area planning, and Mr Rogers mentioned the desire and the need for FE colleges to be involved in that process. Parents and young people should be well placed to make that choice and to benefit from that flexibility after GCSEs.

Another issue, which we have talked about before and is particularly applicable here, is our current unwillingness to reflect on the vocational value of courses, primarily those offered by FE colleges. The whole system, from transfer test onwards, assumes that a specifically academic route is good and that a vocational — what we used to call technical — route is something else; I will not use the word "bad", but it is seen as somehow inferior.

Such a value judgement is wrong and flawed, and it is every bit as wrong and flawed at 16 as it would be at 11. In fact, there is an excellent case for the argument that more people in Northern Ireland should choose the college route at 16. Colleges are generally much better

at incorporating professional input — for example, from industry — into their courses, making those courses more directly applicable to the workplace.

Although the interface between colleges and the workplace is generally sound, we need to improve the interface between schools and FE colleges. Colleges should not be seen as backstop options or a last-chance saloon, but as the preferred option for those looking at careers in industry and the like.

I wonder whether the proposers of the motion are equally content with all the recommendations in the common funding scheme — the Salisbury document. I think we all accept that concerns are being expressed by schools and FE colleges. On the same basis, I suppose that some schools would take issue with what I am saying about colleges being better linked to the real world of the modern workplace.

It strikes me that there is an issue for teachers as well. Again, I would like some consideration to be given to that by the proposers of the motion and the Minister. Within a coherent strategy and common funding approach for students there would, presumably, be a need for a common funding approach for teachers.

That raises additional issues. It seems to me that, for various reasons, the school teaching profession and the college tutoring profession are regarded as entirely distinct from each other. There is a case for a bit more parity of esteem, which we hear a lot about in this House, in that area.

Finally, I wish to introduce into the debate the tracking aspect of the not in employment, education or training (NEET) strategy. I said at the outset that too many people in their late teens fall through the cracks. For many, it can be a particularly vulnerable age. It is essential that we know who and where they are, and that they know what options they have.

In the previous debate, we heard a lot about the need to discuss real issues like education, the economy, the health service — you name it. That was referred to over and over again. I will not count, but there were 94 MLAs here for that vote, and there are about 16 here now for this important issue. I will leave that thought with you.

4.45 pm

Mrs Hale: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on my party's motion,

which is very timely, given the Minister's statement earlier today.

I welcome the news that the Education Minister is to allocate £9.9 million to help schools and colleges to deliver the entitlement framework, but it comes as no surprise that the announcement comes on the back of pressure by the DUP.

Although the additional funding is welcome, it is fair to say that it is only a drop in the ocean. Many schools and colleges still express concerns that, if the common funding scheme is not extended to the longer term, many pupils and, indeed, small local communities, will suffer. Many principals of small rural schools, who do an excellent job, may conclude that the Salisbury report's recommendations to change the common funding scheme will lead to the removal of pupils from their schools to larger schools, in which similar or better educational outcomes cannot be guaranteed.

I have genuine worries that the current review could mean the eradication of small rural schools in favour of large schools in more urban areas. Although there is an acceptance that the funding should be spent where there is need and that certain pupils may need additional resources, I strongly believe that changes to the common funding scheme must be based on an economic case that can show that there will be better educational outcomes for all pupils. That is why the funding for 2013-14 and 2014-15 has to be extended, allowing for a proper debate based on actual models rather than hypothetical outcomes.

My party colleague Mr Mervyn Storey raised a valuable point in the Education Committee. He highlighted the fact that there was no empirical data to prove that larger schools with bigger budgets can provide better educational outcomes for pupils, but that is where the Minister hopes to save large amounts of money.

Another area of contention is the use of free school meals as an indicator in the common funding scheme and, consequently, the delivery of the entitlement framework. I am aware that the uptake of free school meals in a number of post-primary schools in my constituency, which serve some deprived areas, can be as low as 10%. It does not equate to the reality of what is happening. It is also the case that many rural families who may be classed as living in affluent areas feel that the take-up of free school meals would cause isolation and stigmatisation in their community. It is evident that little thought has been given to considering other criteria, such as

education maintenance allowance (EMA) uptake, social deprivation, rural poverty statistics, Department for Social Development (DSD) funding and community need. The list goes on.

Today's debate shows that the Minister needs to rethink certain aspects of the common funding scheme, a point that the DUP raised at Committee and in the House. He must commit to working in an open and transparent manner regarding his Department's savings delivery plans and ensure that his discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning lead to a viable and, indeed, workable 14- to 19-year-old framework that will prepare all our young people for a fluid and unpredictable labour market.

I support the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like everybody else, I welcome the motion and congratulate the Minister on his decision in recent weeks to invest an additional £10 million to help local schools to fulfil their requirements under the entitlement framework.

In recent years, successive Sinn Féin Education Ministers have initiated a broad range of reforms, with an emphasis on ensuring that all our young people leave school with the skills and training required to meet the employment demands of a rapidly changing world. For too long, education provision was planned in an unco-ordinated and bottom-up way, through which the market demands of individual institutions triumphed over the educational needs of the child. Thankfully, however, we now see the building blocks of a system that delivers quality learning while guaranteeing an equitable and more relevant curriculum choice.

Central to this evolution in education provision have been the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework, which, in tandem, have developed key skills, increased access and choice for all pupils and empowered our young people to make informed decisions about their future.

Through the entitlement framework, young people have access to a far wider range of subjects and are now able to choose a mix that best suits their personal needs, not the perceived needs of the institution. Now, academic courses can be integrated with challenging professional and technical courses. That provides a much better base for many future third-level entrants, and, increasingly, the

courses are focused on the requirements of a globalised economy.

Moreover, the entitlement framework ensures the capacity to deliver high-quality professional and technical pathways, again accessed by choice and available through modern organisational flexibility. Above all, it ensures that all our young people enjoy parity of esteem. For the first time, all, not just some, children will be helped to realise their full potential. Academic excellence can still be cherished in our system while ensuring that different pathways are kept open for all children at every possible point.

A LeasCheann Comhairle, at a time when educational discourse is saturated with the issue of underachievement and, more specifically, the ongoing underachievement of those who are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, the importance of the entitlement framework cannot be overstated. With a focus on every young person achieving his or her full potential, from every sector and every background, the entitlement framework will ensure that all pupils will stay engaged in their own learning process. As a result, they will see the relevance of their educational journey, thus increasing their appetite to achieve long-term progression into higher education, training or employment.

If we bear in mind the need to tackle educational underachievement while making the best use of available resources, the Minister's decision to commission a review of the common funding formula was necessary, and the recommendations may help to drive sustainable educational excellence for many years to come. The proposed new formula is not only fair but more accessible and transparent. It comprises seven core principles, and the emphasis will finally be on pupil entitlement with additional premiums that reflect pupil needs. Ultimately, the new formula lays down the foundations for changes that will benefit all young people.

As the Audit Office report illustrated last week, educational underachievement exists largely in communities that suffer social disadvantage. Therefore, it is imperative that resources are directed to the schools that service the communities that suffer most from such deprivation. In light of that, I welcome recommendation 18, which calls for increased funding for socio-economic deprivation to be weighted towards schools with such significant concentrations of disadvantage.

As I outlined at the outset, the decision to extend the entitlement framework funds, as recommended by Bob Salisbury's report, is a welcome step. There is no doubt that it will go some way to ease the budget pressures faced by local schools. I also welcome the fact that the Minister of Education is committed to working closely with his colleague Minister Farry to ensure that the needs of all our young people are equitably met in the years ahead.

The entitlement framework and, indeed, the common funding review are examples of how we can raise standards and target social need. I welcome the fact that the House supports those two initiatives. I look forward to working with all sides of the House to ensure that we continue to tackle educational underachievement as we build a truly world-class education system.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the proposers for bringing the motion to the House, although I note with interest that, as my colleagues and others outlined, issues have moved ahead in that regard since the motion was tabled initially. Schools are broadly supportive of the overall aims of the entitlement framework, but they are continually hampered in its delivery because of budget cuts and the resulting difficult decisions that need to be made. We have discussed the issue on a number of occasions in the Committee for Education, including the impact on schools of the planned phasing out of funding.

Budget cuts and redundancies that have been carried out in schools to ensure balanced budgets have worked contrary to the delivery of the entitlement framework. It is one thing to look at the balance sheets and financial numbers and entirely another to think of the effect that those decisions can have on children in the classroom. I am aware that, when schools experience financial difficulties, balancing budgets takes precedence over delivery of the framework. Principals have taken and, indeed, been forced into making those difficult decisions. Staff have been made redundant, a move which, in some schools, has led to fewer subjects being delivered. Again, that is contrary to the spirit of the framework. Those decisions have impacted directly on the educational experience of all their pupils.

A special school in my constituency has fostered a fantastic relationship with the local campus of the FE college. Through the area-learning community, it has been able to engage in excellent best practice collaboration, something that Northern Ireland's participation in the progress in international reading literacy

study shows is rare, as only over one fifth of teachers say that they are collaborative with their colleagues.

Those relationships that have been built up between schools have been put in jeopardy because of the planned phasing out of funding. As we are in the final quarter of the academic year, and if collaboration is to be encouraged, not just in the short term but in the long term, it must be recognised that that announcement, welcome though it is, comes far too late for many.

Decisions have been taken, best practice has been put in jeopardy, and the educational experience of pupils has been damaged as a result of planning to cope with the phasing out of the entitlement framework funding. I have said in the House previously that a behind-the-sofa approach to funding the education of our children is a far cry from a strategic approach. Inevitably, costs will be associated if principals wish to reverse decisions that were taken prior to last Thursday's announcement of additional funding.

Mr Buchanan: I support the motion. I commend the Chair of the Education Committee and my party colleagues on it for tabling the motion and having it scheduled for debate today.

The importance of funding the entitlement framework for a further two years, as recommended in the independent review of the common funding scheme, should not be underestimated, given the immense benefit that it provides for those in the 14- to 19-year-old bracket. As has been mentioned, since the indication of the tabling of the motion, the Minister gave an indication at the weekend of his intention to extend the funding for the 2013-14 and 2014-15 financial years. That action taken by the Minister certainly shows the effectiveness of the Committee Chair and DUP members in their scrutiny role of his actions and on influencing his decision-making.

However, the Minister must go that step further and work more closely with the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward a long-term coherent strategy for our 14- to 19-year-old pupils. As Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, I know that the Department for Employment and Learning is committed to developing a highly skilled, flexible and innovative workforce that will contribute to social inclusion and economic success. The crucial elements in achieving such a workforce is a coherent strategy that will deliver effective education and training for the

14- to 19-year-old age group by giving them their opportunity to engage in learning and enabling them to participate in and progress to further and higher education or achieve skilled employment.

Of course, there is a growing concern across all our colleges that the post-primary sector is withdrawing from existing partnerships, despite recognition of the exceptional quality and importance of the vocational programmes that are offered by the further education sector, on the grounds that college collaboration is no longer affordable due to the lack of clarity of future long-term funding or a strategy of the entitlement framework. Indeed, Colleges Northern Ireland has expressed its concern about that matter.

For the future benefit of our 14- to 19-year-olds, it is essential that the excellent partnerships that have been developed with schools and colleges in recent years continue. Given the substantial investment that colleges have made in staff and facilities during the period of collaboration, maintaining progress in that area, although a priority for the Minister for Employment and Learning and DEL, should equally be a priority for the Education Minister and his Department.

Although the entitlement framework as originally envisaged by DEL and DE was to contribute to the wider work of improving educational outcomes for all students and addressing the learning barriers that have seen far too many of our young people not achieving their full potential, DEL's concern is that the current trend of delivery will not deliver those potential benefits, with the result that our young people will continue to lose out and leave school with little or no qualifications, with the most vulnerable falling into the NEET category. That is why it is so important for the Education Minister to work closely with the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward a coherent strategy that will not only meet the need but deliver for that sector of society.

Under the strategic direction that was set for the future education sector by DEL, the aim of colleges in Northern Ireland is to be at the heart of lifelong learning; to strengthen economic and workforce development; to enhance social cohesion; and to advance individuals' skills and learning. Indeed, our colleges are now seen as a key agent for strengthening economic development. They have a crucial role to play in supporting business and innovation.

Key factors in the provision of education and training for our young people are to help them

to identify their future aspirations; to agree programmes of learning that will meet their needs and are relevant to the workplace; to improve individual skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT; to improve employability skills; and to enable progression to higher levels of study.

Although DEL has been endeavouring to bridge the gap through its essential skills qualifications, which, over the past 10 years, have delivered excellent results, there is a need to deliver the essential skills —

5.00 pm

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

Mr Buchanan: — courses to our year 11 pupils. However, the present arrangements in the Department do not allow for that, which I believe is a missed opportunity. Therefore, I say to the Minister —

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

Mr Buchanan: — that he should acknowledge that there is a problem, accept that there is an opportunity that can be addressed —

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

Mr Buchanan: — act accordingly, do not bury your head in the sand —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Buchanan: — but endeavour to work closely with the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward a strategy —

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

Mr Buchanan: — that will deliver for the 14 to 19 age group. Sorry, Deputy Speaker.

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Thank you, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I assure the Member who spoke previously that I am not burying my head in the sand on any of these issues.

Can we just put into context why I made my announcement when I did? There are no suspicious minds involved in this statement or even in the previous three. Over the last period, the DUP has quite rightly tabled motions that were relevant at the time of tabling. I am working on them, you are working on them and other Members are working on them, and it

should not come as a surprise that our work comes to fruition at the same time.

Last year, the Executive made an intervention by making a significant amount of money available to education. That was distributed through the aggregated schools budget. Following that, schools quite rightly lobbied me for entitlement framework moneys. They said that, although they welcomed the funding that came from the Executive, there was still a hole in the budget for the entitlement framework. At that stage, I promised them that I would examine the situation further to see what I could do.

A number of events happened after that. At the Executive meeting that followed what were around 500 job losses at FG Wilson in the autumn of last year, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister called all the Ministers together and set us the task of reviewing our budgets to see how we could create and sustain employment. Ever since, I have been reviewing my budget, and I have paid particular attention to two areas: current expenditure and how it was being spent; and how we could sustain employment through my budget.

We had set significant proportions of funds aside for redundancies in specific areas, and Members will be aware that, over the past two years, around 1,200 teaching posts and a significant number of non-teaching posts have been made redundant. Thankfully, the Executive's intervention has doubtless saved hundreds of jobs, and the money that I set aside for redundancies was not needed in full.

So, what were the issues in front of me? Clearly, one was the entitlement framework. I received a letter through official processes about four weeks ago that set out the entitlement framework funding for schools for the next two years. I told officials not to post that letter but to hold on to it until we had completed our work in reviewing the budget. Bob Salisbury's report was published, and one of its recommendations was that the entitlement framework should clearly continue to be funded.

Is the entitlement framework funded sufficiently? No, it is not. Our entire school budget is not funded efficiently, despite the Executive's valiant work to secure more money for education. I have never stood in the Chamber and said that the Department of Education is funded adequately; we have limited resources, and we have to use them as best we can. So, I endeavoured to keep the £3 million this year to bring the entitlement framework moneys up to £9-odd million.

Looking to next year, I decided that the best that we could do was to make £6.4 million available and to taper off the entitlement framework intervention after that, as was planned originally. I simply do not know what will happen beyond that or whether we will be able to afford to continue to fund the entitlement framework separately. We will have to look at area planning, how the entitlement framework is being rolled out and at the co-operation between schools etc to decide whether entitlement framework funding can be made or will be available beyond that date.

I assure Members that I am not following DUP policy. I think that the DUP might be edging into my policy areas. However, I am sure that all Members will agree that it is doubtful whether schools care whose policy it is as long as they get their money. That is the important thing: the money has been delivered to them. I accept that the money was late in the day and that some schools may have already planned their curriculum offer, but circumstances beyond our control led us to where we are. However, the money has now been issued.

In proposing the motion, Miss McIlveen asked a significant number of questions. I will cover some of them now and the rest as I move on. You asked whether the entitlement framework funding is enough: it is not. I accept that. I have endeavoured to make available what we have. I welcome the fact that Members now acknowledge that, contrary to rumours elsewhere, I have a savings delivery plan, and it is accessible and viewable. I will say of that plan that I am reviewing my budget in the context of the FG Wilson meeting.

We have been tasked with examining our budgets and how we create and sustain employment. I will make an announcement to the Assembly in the coming weeks — next week if I can — outlining what changes I have been able to make to sustain and create employment in the Department of Education and to enable us to play our part in building the economy through interventions, which will see roles for construction, and so forth. I will ensure that Members are informed of that in full and, in tandem with that, that the Education Committee is fully briefed on any changes to the savings delivery plan that roll out from that work.

Is the DEL and DE working group still meeting? Miss McIlveen referred to my predecessor's commitment to that working group. It is still meeting. Its members have not reached agreement on a strategy, but that does not mean that we are in disagreement. A lot of work has progressed since the letter that you

referenced, the date of which you said was, if I am correct, 2009. A lot of work has progressed since 2009. The area-learning communities are delivering a strategy at a local level that is based on the Department of Education's policies, and they are working in conjunction with their local higher education providers.

A lot of good work is going on locally, although I remind Members that the sustainable schools policy states that 80% of the entitlement framework should be delivered in the parent school. That is for sustainability reasons and to ease pressure on pupils, in order to ensure that they have a school base. However, great co-operation is going on between schools and DEL at that level through further and higher education groups.

I regularly meet the Minister for Employment and Learning to discuss the way forward in achieving better co-operation between the Department of Education and DEL. Those meetings are also bearing fruit. Indeed, the recent announcement around the EMA rolled out, in part, from our engagements around what is required for our young people's future educational well-being. Therefore, if Members require a written document stating what DE and DEL do together and how we are providing for 14- to 19-year-olds, yes, that can be provided. However, will extra resources come of that? At this moment, no. Extra resources will not come of that, because I do not think that either DEL or DE is in the position to put in extra resources. I see the entitlement framework funding that we have announced as being part of the strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds. I see our work around the EMA as part of it, and we have funded that largely from our own budgets and from savings from the EMA, and so on.

Work towards greater co-operation on a strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds is ongoing, but the outworkings of the strategy and of what is happening is largely, certainly in the Department of Education, the entitlement framework. Members have asked whether we need such a broad range of subjects and for schools to be under pressure to deliver those subjects. The answer to that is yes. We need our students to be equipped — academically, vocationally and otherwise — with a broad range of skills so that they become better rounded, more tolerant and valued individuals, with more self-belief and able to be more valuable to society. They must be able to react to changes in the economy and workforce and become more independent and resourceful learners. The entitlement framework is equipping all our young people to do that, and it

assists the development strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds.

I will cover a few other comments from Members. Mr Kinahan mentioned the cost of area-learning communities. I now have a copy of the answer that he received, and, yes, one reading of it would have the cost as being £10.5 million, as the Member stated. However, the costings that he has in front of him are for the courses that are delivered in those individual schools. The actual cost per school of area-learning communities is £3,000. When you take into account the additional funding for special educational needs schools, and so forth, the cost of area-learning communities is around £600,000 per annum.

I think the area-learning communities are very beneficial to our society. We hear much about sharing in education, and there has been a great deal of sharing, of both resources and knowledge, through the area-learning communities. They have been a great benefit to our education system. I may have mentioned this to Members before: I visited Scotland late last year. The area-learning communities there consist of preschools, primary schools and post-primary schools, all working together and sharing knowledge and lessons together. I would like to see us head in that direction and ensure that all of our schools work together and understand each other's roles in the education system.

As regards other Members' comments, give me one moment to consult my notes. Michaela asked how many schools are involved in area-learning communities. All post-primary schools should be involved in area-learning communities. Some area-learning communities operate better than others. There are fine examples out there of area-learning communities that are delivering great work. Some area-learning communities are not as proactive as I would like to see them, and some individual members of area-learning communities are not as proactive as I would like to see them.

Last year I announced that there was funding for area-learning communities, because their funding was also coming to an end. I set aside £0.5 million per annum for area-learning communities to bid to for courses that were relevant to the curriculum in terms of numeracy and literacy, etc. So there is funding available for them, and I encourage schools to play an active role in them.

Mrs Hale and Mr Hazzard both referred to the broader outcomes of the common funding

formula review, the concerns of some about the common funding formula review and the advantages that Mr Hazzard sees in the common funding formula review. The Department has not come to a final conclusion on the common funding review. Any conclusion that we come to will have to go out to public consultation and views will need to be heard from members of the public, and, indeed, the schools.

There were concerns raised in that context by Miss McIlveen in relation to how the outworkings of the common funding formula and the entitlement framework will affect rural schools. Rural schools are currently operating the entitlement framework. The common funding formula has specific comments about small schools, etc, but it also states that, if we were to take action in relation to small schools funding, we should bring forward a small schools policy.

That small schools policy, by its very nature, would have to be rural proofed. It would also have to be proofed — I am not sure how we can do this — so as to protect small rural or isolated communities. There are communities out there that are small in number compared to the other communities surrounding them, but they have a stakehold in the community, and rightly so, and their school is part of that stakehold, so we would have to proof it in that way as well. I am not sure how we would do that, but we certainly have to be imaginative and inventive in any small schools policy.

I think I have covered the broad range of issues raised by Members during the debate. As I said, I doubt if schools really care why the funding was brought forward as long as it was brought forward and is put in place. I acknowledge the fact that there is not enough funding in education. There is not enough funding in the entitlement framework either, and I endeavour to work with my Executive colleagues to see if we can secure further funding for education. I will report to Members and to the Education Committee the proposed changes I am going to bring forward in the savings delivery plan as a result of our task to see how we can create and secure employment by using our budgets in a different or more imaginative way. I will report that matter back to Members. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Storey: I thank all those Members who have taken part in the debate, and my colleague Michelle, who proposed the motion. As always, she gives the detail and leaves me to gather up all of the bits and pieces that come as a result of what is said. I do not think that we should

dismiss the fact that this is an important day in the House in regard to education, not solely because we are debating this issue, which is very important, but because it is also the day that the Minister has welcomed to Northern Ireland the representatives of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to look at our education system.

We should remind ourselves that that organisation's title is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

5.15 pm

Clearly, it is an organisation that places an emphasis on having coherent, economic, educational co-operation across our education system. I would like the Minister to confirm whether the Committee for Education, as the Committee with the statutory responsibility and as a key player in our education system, will have the opportunity to meet the members of that organisation. I am sure that they want clarity and answers from the Minister, as do we in this House, and an end to the mixed messages, because that is all that we have been getting since 2009.

Let us rehearse where those mixed messages come from. My colleague mentioned a letter from the former Minister Cairtriona Ruane to me in 2009, which read:

"I wish to assure you of my commitment to work closely with Sir Reg to further develop a 14-19 strategy in the best interests of our young people."

Then we come to Sir Reg himself. It was interesting that Mr Kinahan mentioned larger schools. I would caution Members about larger schools; we need to be very careful about that issue. What did Sir Reg say in 2009, when he was the Minister for Employment and Learning? I am not sure whether he was still the leader of his party or who the leader was at that stage. I am still not sure who the leader of that party is at the moment. He said:

"Building on the good progress made to date, a joint 14-19 strategy will be available shortly for consideration."

Where is the strategy? Where is the policy? It is not about just getting a piece of paper. It is about getting a policy because, in the absence of a policy that is clearly set down, a vacuum is created and everyone continues to do what they have always done. If you continue to do what you have always done, you will continue

to get what you have always got. That is why, again and again, we go around the issues of underachievement and of not giving our young people the best possible opportunities.

Then, of course, there is the Department's website, which I visit every day religiously to see what it is up to and to keep an eye on what it is saying. It says that it has a 14-19 policy, that it is continuing to work with DEL and that it is:

"working conjointly to bring forward a co-ordinated programme of provision for 14-19 year olds."

There is still nothing of substance. It is unfortunate that I am speaking after the Minister, but I hope that he will respond to the point that I want to make. Whatever happened to the document entitled 'Together Towards Entitlement'? That document reviewed the entitlement framework, looked at everything, told us that there were fewer than 10 pupils in some classes and told us the challenges and the issues. Recommendation 1 of that document states:

"DE, in collaboration with DEL, should give priority to promoting a wider understanding of the rationale for and implications of the Entitlement Framework and its place within the overall 14-19 DE and DEL policy context to ensure high quality outcomes for this age group."

Mr O'Dowd: If the Member so wishes, I am happy to respond to that point.

Mr Storey: Yes.

Mr O'Dowd: 'Together Towards Entitlement' has happened. We are in the entitlement framework era. The Member will recall that, in September 2011, I announced that the entitlement framework would become a legislative requirement from September 2013 onwards in a phased introduction. I have reminded the Member that the working group continues to meet. DE and DEL are engaged in proactive work. The 14-19 strategy is being delivered to the area-learning communities on the ground, where it should be.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for that clarification. The Committee for Education will be interested to get an update from the working group to see exactly the ongoing work that it has done.

Let me come to the current Minister for Employment and Learning, Mr Farry. In the House a couple of weeks ago, referring to this motion, he said:

"I am also aware that the Member has a motion down for debate in the very near future. My officials and I continue to engage with the Department of Education around those issues, and I know that the Minister of Education is keen to ensure that, collectively, we deliver the best for the young people of Northern Ireland." — [Official Report, Vol 82, No 3, p42, col 1].

There is a clear admission that we need to do something. However, as the Minister mentioned, we then come to look at how it is put into practice. Today, members of the OECD arrived at the Building. We also had an Invest NI presentation upstairs on the whole issue of what is available to companies by way of loans and financial help. In that presentation, the chief executive of Invest Northern Ireland stated very clearly that there is good working collaboration between DEL and DETI. I appreciate my colleague the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning staying for this debate and being with us to give us support. The sad reality is that it seemed as though DE was missing.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The issue is having a clear, coherent policy that runs through our system to give our young people the best possible opportunities. Why do I say that? As the Minister mentioned, let us see how it works out in practice. The third related link in the chain of what happened in the House today is the Minister's statement on area planning and the future of area planning. What is happening with area planning? We have the Minister's policy and the entitlement framework. We have area-learning communities. We have schools accessing the services of further and higher education colleges. We have the absence of a 14-19 policy, albeit with the Minister agreeing that he may give us a paper on that in the future.

I challenge the Minister or any Member of the House to read any one of the area plans that were put in the public domain today and find reference to further and higher education colleges. It is nearly impossible. It does not exist. We have all this talk and rhetoric about practical working on the ground with post-primary schools and further and higher education colleges. However, when it comes to the future planning of our estate, DEL

disappears. I think it should disappear. I think DE should disappear, too. We should have one Department for children and young people that looks at all these issues in a far more coherent way.

What is happening? DEL officials stay inside their legislative rights and say, "Let us not cross the line." DE officials stay inside their legislative rights and say, "Let us not cross the line." The two Ministers talk and have all sorts of discussions and conversations. However, does it work practically on the ground? That is where we have a problem.

Let me come to another issue. Where did the 24 and 27 courses come from? The Minister has not clarified that for us. His Department changed the rules a few months ago. He told schools that, because of issues, it is 18 and 24, rather than 24 and 27. It was a movable feast a few months ago. Who told us that the magic numbers were 24 and 27? That is the problem that I have with the straitjackets that the Departments want to put schools into. Is it not better to allow a school, which knows its pupils best, to determine what is best for those pupils and ensure that they have the adequate provision?

The cynic in me will always say that part of the entitlement framework rationale was to try to turn some of our academic schools into vocational schools and to dilute what goes on in our grammar schools. As a result, we now have not only mixed messages but a mixed economy. We have post-primary schools giving courses that they never provided previously. We have further and higher education colleges providing courses that they never provided previously —

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

Mr Storey: We have other post-primary schools looking at provision that they never had.

The final point that I want to make is around the savings delivery plan. We will wait with interest to see what —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Storey: — the Minister's savings delivery plan has in it. I am not convinced that he has come up to the mark on it. Money has gone somewhere. I want to know exactly where it has gone, and I assure you that we will continue —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone. Order.

Mr Storey: — to look until we find it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in light of recommendation 9 of the review of the common funding scheme and the concerns being expressed by schools and further education colleges, calls on the Minister of Education to extend the funding earmarked for the entitlement framework to the 2013-14 and 2014-15 financial years; and further calls on the Minister of Education to work with the Minister for Employment and Learning to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, a common funding approach for all pupils and students within a coherent strategy for 14- to 19-year-olds.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

John Lewis Retail Development, Sprucefield

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Givan: I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the development opportunities at Sprucefield and, in particular, the Westfield planning application that included the John Lewis store as the key, anchor tenant. That opportunity has been well documented and would have brought £150 million of investment to Northern Ireland. It would have created around 600 jobs in the construction phase and up to 1,500 retail jobs in Northern Ireland at a time when they are desperately needed. Furthermore, it is important for Members to note that John Lewis would have been opening a distribution centre in Northern Ireland had the application been put through. So it is not just about the retail opportunity; the distribution centre and the jobs and investment that come with it would have been part of the development located in Northern Ireland.

Members will be familiar with the long history of John Lewis's engagement with Northern Ireland, which stretches back almost nine years. Let me go through, for the record, how it all started. In June 2004, plans were announced for the first John Lewis store in Northern Ireland to be built at Sprucefield, Lisburn. In November 2004, Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce lodged a formal objection to the planning application. In June 2005, direct rule Minister, Lord Rooker, gave the green light for the John Lewis store and 29 outlets in conjunction with it. In May 2006, Belfast High Court upheld a legal challenge from traders from Belfast and Lisburn, which effectively quashed the planning permission. In March 2007, the Government gave the go-ahead once again. In August 2008, the developer submitted new plans, reducing the number of retail outlets from 29 to 19, and vowed that, as Sprucefield was the only option, ultimately, the development would end up south of the border if the plan was refused. In February 2009, the Environment Minister, Sammy Wilson, announced a public inquiry into

the application. In November 2009, Sprucefield Centre Limited applied to the Department of the Environment (DOE) for planning permission for retail, restaurant and associated infrastructural development, and the Department designated it as a major planning application — an article 31 planning application — and requested that the commission hold a public inquiry. In June 2010, the public inquiry was adjourned on its first day because of a new legal challenge by rival traders, who alleged that the DOE failed to advertise the scheme properly. In 2012, a mid-inquiry meeting was held by the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) to ensure no further delays in the decision.

That is where the process has got to since 2004. It is laughable that we are talking about something that started in 2004. Throughout the process, there has been frustration. There has been legal challenge from Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce and commercial enterprises. I do not blame commercial interests for wanting to challenge this legally. They have the right to do so. I do not object to that, but I object to the courts facilitating a clear conflict of interest — a clear commercial interest — over a planning application. In other places, there is provision for that to be ruled out, and that should be established in Northern Ireland so that the courts do not have to constantly frustrate planning applications because people who have a clear vested commercial interest are trying to block them. Indeed, some of the same organisations then push the boundaries to get planning permission for themselves, but it is all right for them — once they get planning permission, they will do all that they can to stop anybody else getting it.

Then, of course, in January this year, the Minister announced a new area plan, limiting development at Sprucefield to bulky goods only. The nail in the coffin was administered, and John Lewis announced that it was withdrawing its application, but awaits the Executive's consideration of the attempted change in planning policy by Alex Attwood.

I think that it has been helpful for Members to get clear in their mind the very long process that John Lewis and those behind the Sprucefield development have been trying to follow.

We then had an attempt to change planning policy through the Belfast metropolitan area plan (BMAP). It is interesting that the Minister is attempting to go against an independent Planning Appeals Commission. He is interfering with the work of that body, which, for proper reasons, was set up as an independent

organisation, but this Minister has decided that he can overrule the independent Planning Appeals Commission.

The Planning Appeals Commission looked extensively at what was recommended for bulky goods provision. We can go through a number of areas in which, in dealing with issues of concern, the PAC recommended that the bulky goods restriction should not be imposed. There are a number of key quotes from the Planning Appeals Commission's report. Paragraph 6.4.8, in reference to the commission's report on the original extension to Marks and Spencer, states:

"The appointed Commissioner in his report expressed the view that the provision of more retail warehouses at Sprucefield would not assist in achieving a regional trade draw."

It continues:

"It is difficult to see how more of this type of retailing will enhance Sprucefield as a regional centre."

Paragraph 6.4.6 states:

"The bulky goods restriction relates to a fundamental characteristic of the centre to which there is no reference in either PPS5 or draft PPS 5. Such a restriction on the type of retailing to be permitted in one of the three RSCs is clearly a regional matter and should have been made explicit in regional policy (i.e. draft PPS 5). In the absence of any such reference in regional policy, the restrictions now proposed through BMAP would have the effect of fundamentally changing the nature of the designation and are not appropriate for introduction through the development plan process."

That is the recommendation of the independent Planning Appeals Commission, yet this Minister believes that he can supersede all that, go against those independent members and try to retain the bulky goods restriction.

The PAC report states:

"The bulky goods restriction relates to a fundamental characteristic of the centre to which there is no reference in either PPS5 or draft PPS 5. Such a restriction on the type of retailing to be permitted in one of the three RSCs".

Belfast, Londonderry and Sprucefield are the three regionally significant retail centres that have been designated. The Minister is seeking by stealth to take away Sprucefield's regional designation. It is important that we point out that fewer restrictions rather than more are required. The PAC has said that that is required for Sprucefield to achieve what it wants.

Hopefully, the Minister can explain his position to the House today. I trust that the Executive will now be able to deal with the issue, but when the controversy around the statement of intention kicked off, the Minister said:

"I am not attempting to prejudice the outcome of the Public Inquiry".

That is a laudable platitude from the Minister that he does not want to prejudice the outcome of the public inquiry. He then goes on to say:

"I am strongly committed to putting Belfast first in these difficult times."

So he does not want to prejudice the public inquiry into the application from John Lewis for a development at Sprucefield/Lisburn, yet in the same breath he says that he is:

"strongly committed to putting Belfast first in these difficult times."

If that is not a prejudicial statement, I do not know what is. The Minister has blatantly shown the bias in his position by saying that he wants Belfast to be protected first and foremost. We need to bear in mind that that has implications not just for John Lewis. You can forget about development at Sprucefield; even if John Lewis is not able to come to Sprucefield, there will not be any form of development there. The notion that an IKEA-type retailer is coming to Sprucefield is a nonsense. The retail world and how it operates is changing, and government need to change along with that. Change is being driven by consumers, and we need to harness those changes and not try to restrict the way in which things are developing.

In trying to make those restrictions, it is important that we recognise that the retail world has developed through the internet and that we will not protect Belfast by stifling development across Northern Ireland. We can take away Sprucefield as the one issue, because Members may get fixated on it, but, across Northern Ireland, the Minister is saying, "I am putting Belfast first". It is about online shopping, click and connect, what is referred to

as omnishopping, shopping through your laptop, iPad and through texting and about the development of Facebook and Twitter. All those new technological advances are shaping the way that the retail world operates, and if traders anywhere, including in Belfast, do not adapt to all that, they will be in terminal decline. Belfast, as is the case in other town centres, may have been suffering the emptying of some of its units, but not because of John Lewis, which it is not even here. Other factors have been part of all that, and we, as a government, now need to deal with this in the Executive.

Quite rightly, this is of regional significance. The Minister, through BMAP, is trying to circumvent what the regional development strategy (RDS) has stipulated, which is that Sprucefield is a regionally significant centre. He is going against the independent Planning Appeals Commission's idea of how Sprucefield needs to develop by trying to impose that restriction even though it believes, and rightly so, that it should be lifted. He wants to put Belfast first purely from a prejudicial basis. We have heard of political gerrymandering of boundaries; this is the retail gerrymandering of boundaries. Putting Belfast first is gerrymandering the retail boundaries of Northern Ireland and trying to do it through a circuitous route; namely, through the area plan, even though the PAC has said that that is wholly inappropriate. It is regionally significant, and, therefore, it requires the Executive to take the decision. I trust that the Minister will yield to the Executive on this and allow them to take the proper decision. That is where the decision should have been taken rather than through the Minister's approach whereby he has sought to bypass the normal procedures in taking his prejudicial Belfast-first policy forward.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank Paul for securing the debate. It is a vital issue given that we are talking about a massive investment of £150 million. People are talking about, whatever is eventually realised, the potential for 1,500 jobs at a time when the private sector in particular is struggling.

I will talk briefly about the longevity of the issue. I acknowledge that the Minister has at least addressed the issue and come up with a decision, but I wonder what kind of message goes out about this economy when an application can be bobbing about for some 11 years in the system awaiting final decisions. Those decisions should be informed by a much more thoughtful, comprehensive, strategic balance between town centre development and its particular and peculiar needs against out-of-

town development, which can bring with it the strength of major companies and a greater range of options for the shopper. I do not argue on behalf of Sinn Féin that there is a clear or simple answer. There is a balance to be found, and, whilst I commend the Minister for addressing the application, he has, in a sense, simply underlined the need to bring forward that agreed policy.

Parties should not squabble over this issue but, in fact, they do, and that is the unfortunate image that is projected by a failure to have an agreed way forward. There will always be local interest, and I would say that there are tensions within parties. People, at a local level, will argue, naturally enough, for the interest of their constituencies because they are responsible to their constituencies. However, clear and coherent statements of policy with the appropriate regulation and guidance means that people have an explanation when they go back into their constituency with, perhaps, a negative outcome on an issue that they had agreed to support.

However, if we are just bouncing about willy-nilly, or if we are looking simply for the weight of numbers as opposed to the weight of argument, I think that we will not make the correct decision and we will not get it right. Quite often, we will get it spectacularly wrong. I believe that the lobbies that exist all have something legitimate and of interest to say to the Assembly. We have to try to find the balance between what are, clearly, at times, mutually exclusive arguments and trying to decide what is best for the economy. I think that we have not always got that right.

So, I support the Minister, and I encourage him to proceed to develop that type of discussion. As the Minister, he has the power to do that, and I certainly would not support any moves to limit his ministerial powers on the matter. I hope that he will expedite the production of the type of discussion document that will lead to agreed and coherent positions that Members, regardless of whether they get everything that they want, can get behind and support, irrespective of any personal or localised interest. That is because I do not think that that approach will lead us anywhere except into further disputes as we move on.

Mrs Overend: I am pleased to be able to speak on what is an important issue for the Northern Ireland economy. The fact is that the proposal for this retail development would be of huge benefit not only locally to the Sprucefield site and to the Lisburn area but to the whole of our regional economy. The substantial benefits of

the department store were outlined recently in a statement by Sprucefield Centre Ltd and John Lewis on 1 February 2013 that said:

"The Sprucefield Centre Limited, together with John Lewis, was committed to invest over £150 million into Northern Ireland and create over 1,500 retail jobs."

As the Member for Lagan Valley said, it would have created 600 jobs in construction. Additionally, John Lewis would have opened a distribution facility in Northern Ireland, resulting in further investment and jobs. That is not an investment that we can afford to lose, and those are jobs that we cannot afford to do without. I think that most Members will agree that our economy is in desperate need of a boost, with unemployment remaining stubbornly high at 7.8%, youth unemployment continuing to rise and a claimant count that is the second highest in the UK. We have potentially passed up on a great opportunity to make a positive contribution to addressing some of those figures and reversing the current trend, which sees us move further away from the rest of the UK in making an economic recovery.

We must ask how this decision was reached. The DUP Member outlined the detail of the process since 2004, and I need not repeat that. The recent decision by John Lewis to withdraw its planning application was taken because of the Environment Minister's position on introducing a new area plan, which will limit further development at Sprucefield to bulky goods such as furniture. I understand that that decision was reached as part of a policy to put "Belfast first" during these "difficult times". I also understand that the Environment Minister has stated that:

"This is consistent with the revised Regional Development Strategy 2035 which aims to strengthen Belfast as the ... economic driver and the primary retail location in Northern Ireland."

Although I may understand the reasons that he has given, I cannot agree with him because of the points that I made.

I understand that an analysis of potential sales for John Lewis, depending on its location, has been undertaken, and the results show that it would expect around 30% less if it were to base itself at a city centre location.

I believe that we need clarity on the process that is involved. As I outlined, Mr Attwood made his decision clear. However, we subsequently had the First Minister claiming

that this is a matter for the Executive and not for the Environment Minister. We have been told many times that the changes made at St Andrews prevent Ministers from going on solo runs. How does this impact on the John Lewis decision, and who will make any future decisions on this issue? The consequences of these circumstances have, therefore, also led to a lack of clarity and, most likely, a lowering of public confidence in how the Assembly operates and in the Executive's decision-making processes.

One glimmer of hope is that the Sprucefield Centre Ltd and John Lewis said that they will review their position once the Executive have considered the Belfast metropolitan area plan policy and there is clarity on the role of Sprucefield as a regional shopping centre in Northern Ireland. Therefore, John Lewis has continued interest in opening a new department store at Sprucefield, and I urge the Executive and the Environment Minister to act as soon as possible to ensure that that investment is not lost.

5.45 pm

Mr Dallat: I thank Paul for the opportunity to take part in this debate, and I am sure he wonders what on earth someone from East Derry is doing sticking his nose into Sprucefield. However, the subject has been in my heart for many years. Indeed, one of the first debates in which I took part in the Assembly was on this very subject, probably 12 years ago.

I am interested in this because it is Lisburn today, yet it could be Limavady tomorrow and Coleraine the next day. Others will deal with the specifics, the details and all of that, but I will just do the passionate stuff. I am not sure whether Paul visits our neighbouring island, England, very often. If he does, does he ever get off the M6 or M1 and travel through those lovely towns and see the shape that they are in? There is not a shop left. There is no butcher, no baker, no post office. They are all gone, and where are they? They are in the out-of-town shopping centres. That is where they are, and that is the only evidence that I need. They have been replaced by charity shops, hairdressers, — you name it. In Ireland, we perhaps attach a great deal of importance to the heart of our communities — our towns and villages. We have every right to stand up for them.

Let us look at it this way: if the Minister were to please the people over in Lisburn now, the same would happen in other parts next week or next month. And what would we get? We

would get these sprawling, unplanned developments. You build this thing out at Sprucefield, and naturally you will get housing around it. That housing will have no amenities, no bus services, no leisure centres, no anything.

If you do not believe me about England, let us take a wee short trip across the sea to America. A few years ago, I was in Ohio for the St Patrick's Day celebrations. I had a few hours to spare, and I asked to be taken to the nearest town. I was taken to a place called Ashtabula, and I will never forget it. There was not a shop left in it. There was one pub with a few men in it, who wore green hats and were celebrating St Patrick's Day. That was it. Where were the wives? They were away to the shopping mall, but they were going to be away all day, because it was at least 50 miles away.

Anyway, let us get back to Sprucefield. The fear is for Belfast. For years, I watched Belfast be bombed and systematically destroyed. In the past decade or more, I have watched it emerge out of the rubble again, which is fantastic. It is becoming an international place for tourists, and why? It is because it is a good place to come to. However, it is hard work keeping the city centre lively and vibrant, and there is evidence that a lot of that needs to be done. Are we going to do today what the bombers failed to do in the past? Will we do the same to Belfast as has happened to medium-sized and reasonably large towns in England? I do not think so. We could be forgiven for making these mistakes if people had not made them before, but, Paul, they have made them before, and we should not repeat them.

Planning is about creating some kind of balance that allows communities the best opportunity to survive, whether it be Dungannon or Derry, Armagh or Antrim, Lisburn or, indeed, Letterkenny, because towns across the border are affected by these things as well. I understand that officials from both jurisdictions meet to try to keep ahead.

A couple of weeks ago, I was in Glasgow as a member of the Regional Development Committee. I went for a wee potter around the city centre, and what did I find? John Lewis, in the middle of Glasgow, next to the theatre, close to the railway station, next door to the bus station, making a solid contribution to Glasgow, the vibrant city that it is. Now, someone please tell me why John Lewis would want things different in Northern Ireland, because I understand that it is its business policy to locate its stores in town centres. Nobody can tell me

that. Maybe before the evening is out, somebody will tell us why we want to destroy Belfast in preference to —

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: The time is up.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Lunn: I am glad that Paul Givan has brought the matter to the House. I listened with great interest to Mr Dallat. You could not fail to have sympathy for town centres in their present plight, but there are other considerations apart from the very slow growth of out-of-town centres. Town centres are going to have to change and, perhaps, become more residential, more niche retail and more leisure orientated, and that is just a fact. It is the only way that they are going to survive. Frankly, I am not sure that turning down the biggest name in British retailing is a price worth paying. It is a superb company that, in terms of profit and operation, makes more money out of 28 stores than House of Fraser makes out of over 100. It treats its employees as though they were directors.

John Lewis and Westfield know what they want and, in this particular location, they do not want a city-centre location. They are not going to go to the Royal Exchange, no matter what pressure the Minister puts on them. It is just not going to happen. They have worked out their sums. Mrs Overend mentioned the figure of 20% to 30% less footfall, less trade and less profit for them in that particular location. It is even worse due to the fact of where the Royal Exchange is.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Member for giving way. Mr Lunn is the second Member to quote this 20% to 30% figure. It is a very interesting piece of work. I presume that there is some documentary evidence of that, and maybe he would be so kind as to place it in the Assembly Library.

Mr Lunn: I do not have documentary evidence, but I am advised that it is in the planning paraphernalia of the past nine years. That is an estimate that John Lewis has made itself.

Can we really afford to lose an investment like this — and job creation like this? The Minister has every right to be concerned about town centres, but I do not believe that he has chosen the best way of addressing that decline, especially in the current economic circumstances. What message will John Lewis

and Westfield take to their investment friends across the world after nine years of obstruction and argument, when they are actually doing us the favour of bringing £150 million of investment into Northern Ireland, a place where they do not need to be? They can go elsewhere on the island, or they can just not come to Northern Ireland or Ireland at all. I believe that their total investment in the UK represents about 2% or 3% of their total global portfolio. It is not that big a deal for them.

There is a history to this. Mr Givan has given us the chronology of the past nine very sad years, but, even prior to that, Westfield tried to invest £200 million or thereabouts in Belfast for 10 years, and it was defeated by policy in Belfast as well, being told that Victoria Square could go first — and look what that did to Donegall Place — and then the Royal Exchange and, maybe in 10 years, Castle Court. It made a business decision to walk away, but it has come back. It would like to look at Sprucefield and, frankly, I think that it has been treated abysmally by our planning system and by the organisations that have been ranged against it by the Planning Service and the Department.

Not to be too hard on the Minister and, indeed, one of his predecessors who happens to be here, I would like to acknowledge that they have both tried to streamline the planning process, particularly Minister Poots in his time. I will give Mr Attwood credit for trying to deal more quickly with some of the big applications. Even though it is the wrong decision, I doubt whether this one would have been made so quickly under another Minister. You have made that a priority, and I give you credit for it.

I go back to the fact that this is the biggest name in British retailing. It is not going to come back to us. This bulky goods restriction is, frankly, a bit of a red herring. We all know that that restriction is now out of date. It predates internet shopping.

Mr Givan told us, and everybody knows, that the Planning Appeals Commission rejected that as a reason. How can you have a regional shopping centre so designated 10 or 12 years ago, which will only be able to sell bulky goods? If that is the case, how come Next, Boots, Toys R Us and Argos — to say nothing of Sainsbury's — have all managed to set up shop in Sprucefield in the meantime, and they are not necessarily selling bulky goods. What is going on?

If the policy should have been bulky goods only, how come it has taken nine years to tell

Westfield and John Lewis that? How many millions of pounds have been spent in the course of the planning application only for them to be told something that, apparently, has been policy since 2004? What is the point of designating Sprucefield, with all its advantages in respect of road connections, its closeness to large population centres and a regional shopping centre, if major retailers cannot set up shop there? Mr Givan is absolutely right. It will be the end of any meaningful investment at Sprucefield unless this decision is changed. I appeal to the Minister to rethink this one. I do not think that it is too late, but we will hear what you have to say.

Mr Craig: I agree that it is good that this subject has been brought to the House. Like many others around the Chamber, I am disgusted, outraged and sickened by the length of time that this application process has taken, and, as yet, it is not complete. As we learned earlier, this has all been going on since 2004. What I find remarkable in all of this is that we are talking about not only one of the best known names in the retail business in the whole of the United Kingdom, that is, John Lewis, but one of the few national chains in the United Kingdom that buys into the whole social principle with regard to its workforce. That is why I find it remarkable that the SDLP, of all parties, has attacked it.

The company is wholly owned by those who work in it. I think that is something that the Minister needs to go away and have a good, long, hard think about. It is not one of those capitalist companies that drains the resources out of the system and passes them on to billionaires who we all rarely get to see or know about. It is a company that shares its profit among its workforce and is wholly owned by its workforce. I thought that that party over there would have been wholly behind that and would have totally supported it coming in to Northern Ireland and, for that matter, Ireland as a whole. Others have already asked what the issue was. Why could it not go to Belfast or, for that matter, to the centre of Lisburn? All those questions were asked at the time.

In 2006 and 2007, I and some of my colleagues, such as the Minister of Health, were privileged to have sat in negotiations with John Lewis, which were carried out with the local authority at the time. As mayor at that time, I took part in those negotiations, and what I found fascinating about the company was not only its social principles and how well it looked after its workforce but the whole concept of what it was bringing, not specifically to Sprucefield or Lisburn but to Northern Ireland

as a whole. At that time, it was said that it would bring 1,200 jobs. Some 800 of those jobs were to be directly associated with the shop, and 400 were to be part of an all-Ireland distribution network. If those 400 jobs do not come to Sprucefield, they will certainly go somewhere else. We can be absolutely certain of that.

6.00 pm

The other thing that I found extremely alarming when the Minister made his statement was that the company, which has a social conscience, had clearly agreed that a quarter of its workforce at Sprucefield would be targeted for areas of high unemployment. In fact, part of the agreement was that it would target unemployment in areas such as West Belfast, which the Minister allegedly represents. I say "allegedly" because 25% of that workforce would have been 300 jobs, targeted for areas like West Belfast. I would not pat myself on the back if I were the Minister, allegedly representing West Belfast and taking 300 jobs away from my own area. I would hang my head in shame, quite frankly.

What was the impact on all of us going to be? A major shopping chain coming not just to Sprucefield but to Northern Ireland plc, bringing with it not only the prestige that it wanted but an all-Ireland draw. That is why it could not go in the middle of Belfast. The company clearly works out its plans so that there is a minimum population of 2,500,000 to draw from.

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

Mr Craig: That cannot be done in Belfast, but we will all be the losers as a result of this, including West Belfast, which the Minister allegedly represents.

Mr Poots: As you go through life, you very often find that the desirable can be unobtainable and the obtainable is sometimes undesirable. The desirable for Minister Attwood is that John Lewis would come to Northern Ireland and locate in Belfast city centre. For me, the desirable is that John Lewis would locate in Lisburn city centre. John Lewis did its own estimates of what it could achieve in sales at the Sprucefield site. It could achieve 60% of those sales in Lisburn city centre, and 80% in Belfast city centre. Therefore, the desirable, from the Minister's point of view, and, indeed, from my point of view, is unobtainable.

The question is whether the obtainable is desirable, namely John Lewis coming to Northern Ireland and settling at Sprucefield. The contention of the Minister should be — it certainly is the opinion of the majority of MLAs — that it is desirable for a number of reasons, without going into great depth on areas already covered by Members. A considerable number of jobs come with the store, and that will almost inevitably lead to some dislocation because every time a new spend enters the market, someone else loses out. However, many people travel outside Northern Ireland to get to certain stores — previously IKEA but still the likes of John Lewis, Harvey Nichols and Brown Thomas. People will travel outside Northern Ireland to go to such stores. We now have IKEA, which took another facility out of the market that encouraged people to travel outside Northern Ireland and take their money to mostly mainland Britain, but elsewhere. That element certainly ticks the box of being desirable.

The project would also encourage considerably more cross-border trade and bring fresh money into Northern Ireland's pockets, employing people in Northern Ireland. That element is also desirable. In terms of job creation and jobs dislocation, I think there would be a strong evidence base that the scheme would end up delivering considerably more jobs than would be dislocated.

The other element of its desirability, which was touched upon, is the ethical business that John Lewis is. The employees are the shareholders and benefit every year over and above their salary by about £3,000. That is as a result of their shareholding in the company that is John Lewis. I am not really very socialist but that is a socialist model that works, and the SDLP is decrying it. So I would like the SDLP to buy into that model because it is one that works very well. Not only would we create jobs, we would be better valuing people in what is generally a lower-paid sector. So in seeking to bring John Lewis to Northern Ireland, I am really more of a socialist than the SDLP Minister. People in the sector would receive well-paid jobs and enjoy the work that goes with that.

It was pointed out, rightly, that the development would bring a jobs benefit well beyond Lagan Valley. I know that John Lewis was particularly targeting west Belfast as one area in which it recognised that many unemployed people could be trained up directly to work on the shop floor.

I know that the Minister is not wholly opposed to out-of-town facilities because he has passed applications for a number of such facilities,

including some in Londonderry. Certainly, in very strong SDLP constituencies, he does not seem to have such a great problem with this type of proposal. Nonetheless, I hope that there is nothing political about this.

The evidence is there: we can have John Lewis in Northern Ireland or we can have John Lewis in Dublin. What would do the most damage to Belfast: a store in north Dublin attracting thousands of people each week down there, or a store 10 miles from Belfast attracting thousands from the South to Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Poots: I am backing Belfast by supporting bringing John Lewis to a location 10 miles from Belfast, as opposed to Dublin.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, welcome the debate, if only to put the record straight on a number of issues. I thought that it was an interesting ploy of Mr Givan's to detail the chronological history of this application as if somehow to wash the hands of his Ministers. I note with interest that Mr Givan failed to put on record that he was a special adviser to the Environment Minister for some of that period, as well as being a Lisburn City councillor.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I am happy to give way on that.

Mr Givan: Believe me that, if, in that role, I had had the opportunity to bring to bear any influence, I would have sought to do so. I did not have that opportunity. As I pointed out, Minister Wilson referred the application to the Planning Appeals Commission in 2009. That is the only decision that a DUP Minister has ever had to make about John Lewis.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

Minister Wilson has questions to answer about his continued failure to agree the sale of a small piece of land at Rushmere, which would, coincidentally, bring almost 1,000 jobs in retail and construction. The DUP has, yet again, given mixed messages. However, it is a day and a time of mixed messages from political unionism.

Members want to talk out of both sides of their mouth on some issues because they are local

councillors. I note with interest that all those who have spoken thus far have been councillors, and members of councils that backed the Northern Ireland Independent Retail Trade Association (NIIRTA) town retail planning recommendations, which included saving our town centres and the economic regeneration of our town centres. Perhaps the Minister, in his reply to the debate, will detail for me, if not for some other Members, the impact on my constituency if the application by John Lewis had been given the go-ahead.

May I remind Members that John Lewis, plus the 19 other stores, withdrew the application? That was not the Minister's decision, and it is important to recognise that. There has been a failure by previous Environment Ministers to publish a number of planning policy statements that would have clarified matters much sooner.

Mr Givan pointed out the use of the legal system and judicial reviews. I am sure that he, in his capacity as Chairman of the Justice Committee, might want to question the legal system on that.

In Lurgan, for example, there are seven brownfield sites within the development zone of the town centre. Why are those not being developed? Why are growth and development in those areas not an issue for other parties?

The Minister is on record as saying that the footfall in Craigavon, for example, would be reduced by some 35% if the development at Sprucefield were to go ahead. I am interested to learn how that figure was reached.

How was that assessment made? Where did those figures come from? It is important to put that on record.

Mr Poots said that he was backing Belfast, so it might be useful for the Minister to give us his assessment of the current viability of Belfast city centre. I say that because we all know what is happening on our streets, and we know about the additional amount of revenue, as a consequence of the flag protests, that Belfast City Council and the Executive have had to put towards Belfast at this very difficult time.

It is important to realise other matters. Sites are available not only in Lurgan and Belfast but elsewhere. If John Lewis is so keen and has done such a study of the feasibility of being in Northern Ireland, why were other sites not considered? We all know about mid-Ulster and places such as Portadown, which is referred to as the hub of the North. Why were they not considered to be —

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will give way in a second. Why were they not considered to be alternative and suitable locations?

Mr Lunn: Westfield and John Lewis chose Sprucefield for geographical reasons and for its closeness to population centres. It is far and away, and obviously, the best site in Northern Ireland. I do not decry Lurgan for one minute, but it is not in the same class.

Mrs D Kelly: I am sure that the people of Lurgan, especially those who vote for the Alliance Party, would be very interested to learn of your judgement of the town of Lurgan. On that point, and in relation to Lisburn, one wonders why there was such opposition to proposals for the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site. It was only about three years ago that there was a preferred bidder for that site, and there was a failure of agreement around the Executive table. Then, of course, there was the economic collapse, and the bidder disappeared into the ether. If people really are champions of their constituencies, one wonders why they did not ask greater questions of their Executive colleagues when they failed to reach agreement around the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site.

I have every confidence in the Minister being able to defend his decisions on this issue. As a party, we champion workers' rights; the party came from the Labour and trade union movements. That is not an unimportant point to remember, particularly in the year of the centenary of the great lockouts in Belfast and Dublin. The SDLP will continue to support workers, but it is amazing to see the number of champions around the Assembly for one developer.

Mr B McCrea: Lots of things have been said, but not yet by everyone, so I will add a contribution. I am struck by the fact that the time I most recently met Mrs Kelly outside this environment was at Sprucefield. I was looking for some lights. There is something about trying to provide a shopping environment that people want to go to.

These days, economic development seems to be about building clusters — retail outlets, science premises or companies. It is efficient to put everything together. That is one reason why I am surprised that we have not been able to build on what seems to me to be an excellent site in and around Sprucefield, which has a good infrastructure and a number of existing

significant retail outlets. It seems to satisfy the demands not only of the local population but of the wider population who shop there.

The challenge to the Minister is this: how do we undertake proper regional planning? It cannot be that we merely start off with a greenfield site from scratch. There are existing assets, be they infrastructure or businesses, all of which should be taken into account.

An investment such as that proposed by John Lewis would bring other benefits. Surely, when we are in a recession — and we are, undoubtedly, in one — what Government should do is try to find every way that they can to encourage investment. Otherwise, they are left to pick up the tab either for social security payments or public works and suchlike.

6.15 pm

I am interested in the Minister's approach to that and a can-do attitude that, where there is potential for investment, asks what we can do to make it more attractive and make it happen sooner rather than later, because there is a knock-on effect to employment, both during construction and thereafter. That is the real issue. Nobody denies that we need to have some form of strategic oversight in planning for Northern Ireland. However, it seems to me that we are not entirely convinced about what it is. Maybe the Minister will deal with that.

An issue that also needs to be addressed is the very first one that I think I dealt with when I came into politics. It was that long ago. It was the John Lewis site. I remember getting a photograph. Mr Speaker, you would be surprised to see that I looked a lot younger and slimmer when that photograph was taken seven or eight years ago, when we were saying that we would be welcoming John Lewis. *[Interruption.]* I hear some unkind people saying that the photograph might be in black and white. It shows that we have taken quite an extraordinary amount of time to reach a decision on that.

I have to say, for what it is worth, that the straw poll would indicate to me that just about every woman in the country comes up and asks, "Where is John Lewis?" Mrs Kelly may not be in that group. However, quite a considerable number of people say that they simply do not understand why something that people want cannot be delivered. Why has it taken so long?

Of course, we know that there were issues in the past. We have had the timeline put out, judicial reviews and other issues, but I have to

say that people expect better from our Administration. They want to see the matter resolved. They want to see John Lewis in place. The site in Sprucefield is ideal for it. It seems to suit its business model. It seems to be a good employer. It seems to tick all the boxes. I would like the Minister to tell us, if it is possible, what he will do to encourage investment in and around the centres of excellence, commerce and logistics that we have, because we should surely build on our existing assets.

Mr Attwood: I thank everybody for their contributions. I will deal first of all with the point that has just been made by Mr McCrea and was touched upon earlier by Mr McLaughlin, which is that, contrary to what people might think, I am convinced about what is needed with regard to retail policy. When it comes to shaping future retail policy, we need to shape it differently from the past. To go back to the Mr McLaughlin's point: that is why we have recently appointed consultants. To do what? We have appointed them to draft a new planning policy statement 5 (PPS 5), which will acknowledge all the issues that have been raised here with regard to the retail picture and narrative in Northern Ireland and shape the policy that is right for the future. What is the policy that is right for the future? It is to embed deeper in the planning system support for town and city centre retail. When it comes to making decisions that are consistent with the law, current policy, practice and the regional development strategy, I have tried to be very faithful and consistent with all those requirements to show that town centres and city centres need to be protected.

A lot of decisions have been made. Members of the House will be aware that, before Christmas, I said no, no and no to three retail applications for Derry and said yes to only one in order to demonstrate that, consistent with policy, practice and good law, that is the way in which we should go in the future.

Mr McCrea wishes to see how we demonstrate that the planning system and DOE are fit for purpose and are opening the doors for sustainable development — there is a difference. I will not be a Minister who, at all costs, places and times, will approve development. I will not. As legislators, we should not indulge that sort of practice, but sustainable development. How have we done that? We have done that by turning around article 31 applications — two thirds of those that I inherited have now been addressed. We have done that through turning around renewable applications, especially for individual wind turbines. Why? To sustain the farming

industry. We have done that by meeting or being close to meeting timelines in respect of all planning applications. Corners have been turned, but reform needs to be deepened and the planning system needs to get itself even fitter for purpose. However, let nobody pretend that the past 18 months do not demonstrate that the planning system is fitter for purpose than it was and that there is more work to be done in that regard.

Mr Poots said —

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will take points in a second.

Mr Poots said that the evidence base will show that considerably more jobs will arise from the Sprucefield development than will be lost elsewhere. He referred to what he called "dislocation". That is not the case. I agree on the great merits and ethics of John Lewis. I hope that the consequence of that is that other parties, when it comes to health service expenditure and welfare expenditure, will show the same commitment to ethics so that people in need are put first and profit is put behind the door, where it should be —

Mr Givan: You did not.

Mr Attwood: I will come to that point.

The evidence base flatly contradicts Mr Poots's contention that there will be considerably more jobs from the John Lewis development.

Remember: the issue with Sprucefield is not John Lewis per se; it is the other 19 stores and seven restaurants, the scale of which is greater than the John Lewis proposal. I regret that we are not going to a planning inquiry. The evidence that I rely on is the evidence of survey, the regional development strategy 2035 and the existing planning policy statement 5. If that is wrong or if I have drawn the wrong conclusions, why did those who support Sprucefield not interrogate my evidence, their evidence and the evidence of the third parties that were involved in the Planning Appeals Commission hearing? Why did they not test that evidence in front of the independent body, which would have given advice to government about the right outcome? That is for them to answer. However, I would like to have the answer, because my evidence led to the compelling conclusion that the advice that I had to give to the public inquiry was that we should protect our city and town centres and that the greater Belfast city and town centres need to be

protected, particularly Belfast. What is the evidence —

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will. What is the evidence in that regard?

Whatever the Planning Appeals Commission might have said to the Department about its retail recommendations in 2009, we live in 2013. What is the evidence? You may giggle, Mr Givan, but the evidence comes home to your constituency. It comes home to all the constituencies that are within 60 minutes' driving distance of Sprucefield. What is the evidence? Unlike Britain, which has 11% vacancy of business units, we have 20%. It is 23% in Belfast. Tell the businesses, retailers and workers in Belfast, Lisburn, Craigavon, Newry, Banbridge and Newtownards the full consequences of the Sprucefield proposal —

Mr Givan: Of your decision; of Belfast —

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have debate across the Chamber.

Mr Attwood: What is the evidence on the Sprucefield proposal? It would have a 22.9% impact on footfall being diverted from Lisburn to Sprucefield. It would be over 12% from Belfast and 35% in the constituency of Mrs Kelly in Craigavon —

Mr Givan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a moment.

Mr Poots argued — this is where I will give way — that the jobs from the Sprucefield proposal would be greater than the loss or dislocation of jobs from other centres. There are up to 100,000 retail jobs in Northern Ireland. Of those jobs, up to 50,000 are in the greater Belfast area. The evidence that I wanted to be interrogated and tested before an independent inquiry at the PAC tells me that the impact would have been over 10% on Belfast, over 20% on Lisburn and over 30% on Craigavon. Given that, can you explain to me how you work out the maths that say that the gain of 1,500 jobs at Sprucefield would not have meant a loss of many, many more jobs in Lisburn, Belfast, Newtownards and the greater Belfast area?

Mr Poots: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is a fairly simple explanation. If people are travelling out of Northern Ireland to spend money and there is the potential to bring people

into Northern Ireland to spend money in the retail sector, that would equate to a greater spend in Northern Ireland and would create greater employment. I suspect that Belfast has lost far more as a result of the clothes shops on Boucher Road than it would have lost from John Lewis being at Sprucefield.

Mr Attwood: I trust that that evidence will be lodged in the Assembly Library, as I will lodge my evidence on the retail impact that is proven by surveys, the assessment of turnover and interviews in 22 locations. Those figures direct me to draw the conclusion that I have.

Why did I draw that conclusion? The RDS 2035 states that there should be a "precautionary approach" to out-of-town retail. It also states that Belfast is a "regional economic driver" and that Sprucefield is a regional shopping centre. There is a difference. The Executive endorsed the RDS 2035 in March 2012. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: Secondly, PPS 5, which is the only live retail policy — I wish that that were different — confirms that there should be a precautionary approach. The retail figures on the losses of shops and their closure also confirm that there should be a precautionary approach. In my view, any other approach would have been hostile to the interests of Belfast, Lisburn, greater Belfast and the North.

This was a moment to draw a line in the sand by giving advice to a planning inquiry about what we thought was the best retail policy. It was not the moment to serve the interests of any one or other retailer but to serve the interests of retail over the next 20, 30 and 40 years.

Adjourned at 6.27 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Community Resuscitation Strategy

Published at 10.30 am on Tuesday 26 February 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly advising Members of my intention to develop a Community Resuscitation Strategy for Northern Ireland.

In February 2012 the Assembly debated a motion on the provision of Emergency Life Support (ELS) skills training to every school, community and workplace in Northern Ireland.

ELS skills are the key set of actions needed to keep someone alive until professional help arrives. It includes performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR); dealing with choking and serious bleeding; how to put someone in the recovery position, and helping someone who may be having a heart attack.

The evidence indicates that in places where there is a high proportion of the population trained in ELS skills the survival rate for those who suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest is higher than in areas where the proportion of the population trained in ELS skills is low.

While I welcomed the Assembly motion last February, I also acknowledged the valuable work that is already taking place across Northern Ireland, by the Health and Social Care service and a number of voluntary organisations such as the British Heart Foundation, ABC for Life, the Red Cross and St John Ambulance. As Minister, however, I am conscious that resources both within the health service and in the voluntary and community sector are finite. We need to make the best possible use of the resources that are available to ensure that we maximise the number of people trained

in ELS skills.

I have asked the Chief Medical Officer to establish a working group to develop a community resuscitation strategy for Northern Ireland, aimed at coordinating available resources to maximise the number of individuals trained in ELS skills. The working group will be chaired by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and will include representatives from my Department, Health and Social Care bodies, community and voluntary bodies involved in resuscitation training as well as representation from other Northern Ireland Departments such as the Department of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and the Department of Social Development.

Each year in Northern Ireland approximately 1,300 cardiac arrests occur outside a hospital environment. Tragically, fewer than 10% of people who suffer an out-of-hospital cardiac arrest will survive to be discharged from hospital. In the Programme for Government 2011-2015 my Department has made a commitment to improve access to thrombolysis and to expand cardiac catheterisation capacity to improve access to diagnostic intervention and treatment and the development of a new primary percutaneous coronary intervention (primary PCI) service model for NI by 2014/15. Key to maximising the benefit to the population of this PFG commitment and investment is survival to thrombolysis or in due course primary PCI service. The earlier patients are treated with thrombolysis or coronary interventions the better their chances are of recovery. By extending ELS training and keeping people alive to allow them to avail of thrombolysis or primary PCI we can maximise the chances of survival or improved recovery from heart attack. With 1,300 cardiac arrests occurring outside a hospital environment each year in NI and less than 130 of these surviving to discharge I recognise we have some considerable way to go, however I believe ELS training can help us ensure more timely responses and better outcomes for patients. I have therefore no doubt about the need to extend ELS training in order to

save more lives.

We need to, and we can, achieve greater coverage in communities, schools and workplaces throughout Northern Ireland. We can achieve this if Ministers, their Departments, District Councils, other public bodies and voluntary and community sector organisations continue to work in partnership and develop new approaches to ELS training.

I believe a Northern Ireland community resuscitation strategy will help to focus a drive to increase the number of people, of all ages, trained in ELS skills and to coordinate the use of available resources to achieve this. The working group will be asked to have the ready strategy for consultation by October 2013.



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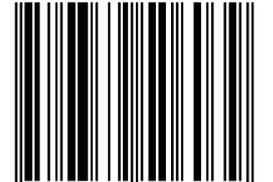
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