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Contents

Assembly Business	1
Ministerial Statements	
Building a Prosperous and United Community.....	1
Planning Policy Statement 2: Natural Heritage	12
Committee Business	
Committee for Regional Development: Better Use of Public and Community Sector Funds for the Delivery of Transport Options.....	19
Assembly and Executive Review Committee: 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition'	32
Oral Answers to Questions	
Health, Social Services and Public Safety	37
Justice.....	42
Committee Business	
Assembly and Executive Review Committee: 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition' (<i>Continued</i>).....	49
Adjournment	
Proposed Closure of Drumcree College, Portadown	55
Written Ministerial Statements	
Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Potential Trust Procurement Issues	63
Social Development: 2013 Annual Report on the Concordat between the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government.....	63

Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 2 July 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: The Minister of the Environment has informed me that he will not make a statement on Planning Policy Statement 21 this morning. I believe that his intention is to issue a written ministerial statement in due course. Members will note that revised indicative timings have been issued.

Ministerial Statements

Building a Prosperous and United Community

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): I welcome the opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly about the economic package Building a Prosperous and United Community, announced by the Prime Minister, the deputy First Minister and me in Downing Street on 14 June. This important initiative contains a range of measures to help rebalance the local economy and secure a shared future for everyone in Northern Ireland. The Assembly will be aware that this package was in development over the last two and a half months and was only finalised just ahead of the G8 conference.

There have been some criticisms that the significant economic pact, which affects the House and the Executive, was agreed without a statement to the Assembly. The facts are that the pact was subject to Executive approval, and indeed the Executive ratified it at the very next meeting following the G8 last Thursday. Today, at the first available opportunity, I am now in a position to provide Members with the details.

As regards the package itself, the Government and the Executive are committed to working together to tackle the important issues of rebalancing the economy to meet the challenges of promoting investment and jobs here and to addressing the chronic entrenched divisions in this society. Progress on both of those is vital if Northern Ireland is to maximise its potential.

The measures in the economic package ratified by the Executive complement the proposals in the Together: Building a United Community strategy that we announced on 9 May. It was aimed at tackling divisions and building a shared future. I am delighted that ministerial colleagues, at our meeting last Thursday, regarded the 'Together: Building a United Community' document as a positive starting

point and unanimously committed the Executive to its delivery. Northern Ireland needs the right economic plan to promote a stronger private sector, and it needs the right social plan to help build a more cohesive, shared society. This package requires the Government and the Executive to work imaginatively to help Northern Ireland move in that direction.

Many of the measures in the economic package sit well alongside actions already being taken to grow the local economy and increase employment opportunities and prosperity for all. Even so, it is important to note that the measures in 'Building a Prosperous and United Community' are not a substitute for the Executive's aim in relation to corporation tax. The Executive will, therefore, continue to push for corporation tax powers to help provide the necessary stimulus for economic growth. I believe, like the many hundreds of people who responded positively to the public consultation on the issue, that this measure, above all others, has the ability to deliver the necessary economic step change. Devolution of this power would allow the Executive to meet their shared objective of rebalancing the local economy more quickly than if they were reliant on the policy levers currently available alongside those outlined in the package.

As the package on its own is not enough, pressing the Government for the devolution of corporation tax remains the Executive's key priority, and officials are examining the actions that could be taken forward now, so that a devolved rate could be implemented as soon as possible after what, it is hoped, will be a positive decision by the UK Government in the autumn of 2014. Although it is obviously disappointing that the Prime Minister does not intend to make a decision on the devolution of corporation tax until the autumn of 2014, the Executive remain committed to securing these important powers and welcome the Government's commitment, should they take a positive decision, to implement that decision during this parliamentary term.

Before looking at the detail of the package, it is worth highlighting the Executive's own proposals aimed at building a united community. The Executive are determined to work to achieve that goal and, by acknowledging the 'Together: Building a United Community' document as a positive starting point, are emphasising that there are a number of elements of the plan that individual parties consider do not represent the height of their ambition. Importantly, every Minister has committed to the delivery of the strategy.

Good relations across all parts of our community are an essential ingredient of building a prosperous, peaceful and safe society that is enriched by diversity and is welcoming to all. Specifically, tackling the twin blights of sectarianism and racism, in addition to other forms of intolerance, is essential in shaping a shared and cohesive community equipped to face the challenges of an ever-changing world. The Executive's vision is of a united community based on equality of opportunity and the desirability of good relations and reconciliation, a community strengthened by its diversity, in which cultural expression is celebrated and embraced and in which everyone can live, learn, work and socialise free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.

A substantial new package of measures to build this shared future was announced on 9 May. The proposals included a programme to reduce and ultimately eliminate all the peace walls by 2023; 10,000 United Youth programme cross-community placements for young people; 10 shared educational campuses in five years; and 10 shared neighbourhood developments. The blueprint, 'Together: Building a United Community', which was published on 23 May, set out a detailed framework for Executive action; the measures in the economic package complement that plan.

Moving on to the package itself, there are a number of significant measures to note. The Executive welcome the UK Government's clear commitment to take a decision on the devolution of corporation tax powers by autumn 2014. They welcome the opportunities provided by the additional resources that are being made available through additional EU funding and the increase in the RRI borrowing limit. The Executive also welcome the commitment that all of Northern Ireland will continue to enjoy assisted area status post 2013. The commitments to establish a joint ministerial task force to examine whether tailored support is required for our local banks is also of significance. The Executive welcome the UK Government's pledge to work together to improve the uptake of UK-wide schemes aimed at improving business access to finance in the local economy.

I will now examine the detail of each of the main measures in turn. The package commits the Government to take forward further work on the devolution of corporation tax powers and to make a final decision on their devolution no later than the autumn statement of 2014. The Executive note and are grateful for that clear commitment. The package also indicates that, if a positive decision is made on corporation tax

rate powers, the Government would introduce a stand-alone Bill in the normal way, with the aim of its becoming law before the prorogation of Parliament prior to the 2015 general election. Again, the assurances that the necessary legislation can be introduced before the end of the current Parliament are to be welcomed.

The package also commits the Executive and the Government to examine the potential for devolving specific additional fiscal powers. That work will include looking at the opportunities for a corresponding and ongoing increase in the Executive's annual capital borrowing limit proportionate to any additional revenue-raising powers and considering wider issues of affordability. The Executive and the Government recognise that decisions around any further fiscal devolution require careful consideration. Following that examination, recommendations for further devolution will be put to Executive and Government Ministers by autumn 2014.

The UK Government are to make available up to an additional £50 million in 2014-15 and 2015-16 in borrowing powers. The Executive welcome that short-term boost to our capital borrowing. Any enhanced ability that allows the Executive to commit to additional capital projects is a positive step, and the additional RRI borrowing will be used to help to support specific shared housing and education proposals for the benefit of our citizens.

The Executive and the Government recognise the important role that Peace funding has played in supporting cross-community projects to promote reconciliation and in tackling inequalities and disadvantage. As a result of the EU budget negotiations, the Peace programme has now secured €150 million funding for a future Peace IV. Under that package, the Executive are encouraged by the Government's commitment to allocate a further €50 million from the UK's European territorial co-operation allocation, subject to confirmation of the UK's allocation. The Executive have agreed that they will seek, where appropriate, to use that additional funding to support the United Youth programme announced on 9 May. They will also seek North/South Ministerial Council agreement to ensuring that submissions to the Special EU Programmes Body put building a shared and integrated society at the heart of the Executive's objectives for the Peace IV programme.

EU structural funds play an important role in promoting competitiveness and enterprise and have the potential to support cross-cutting programmes to build a shared and cohesive

society. The Executive and the Government recognised the concern that the EU criteria for the allocation of structural funds for 2014-2020 would have led to a 43% reduction in funding for the local economy. Under the terms of the new package, the Executive welcome the confirmation that the UK Government are committed to revising the allocation of post-2014 structural funds across the UK. The increase in our allocation to €457 million, reflecting an additional €181 million for the investment for jobs and growth objective, will enable additional spending on the Executive's priorities for research and innovation, SME competitiveness, renewable energy, employment, skills and social inclusion.

As Members will be aware, the Executive face unique challenges in rebalancing the local economy and in addressing disadvantage and continuing divisions. The current 100% assisted area status enables them to provide targeted support to a range of private sector-led projects throughout Northern Ireland. Selective financial assistance provided through Invest Northern Ireland, for example, has helped to promote more than 3,000 new jobs here in the past three months alone. As part of the economic package, the Government will continue with 100% assisted area status coverage for this region, and the policy will be retained for at least the medium term. The Executive, therefore, welcome the decision to maintain 100% assisted area status. The ability to continue to provide regional aid has been recognised by all parties in the Executive, and that decision will enable the Executive, working through Invest Northern Ireland, to continue to offer selective financial assistance (SFA) beyond 2014. The outcome will be to help drive continued investment and business expansion in the local economy. In the most recent financial year, ended March 2013, Invest NI promoted almost 7,400 new jobs and levered nearly £608 million of investment on the back of the support provided through SFA. The Executive will continue to support the UK Government in their ongoing discussions with the European Commission about finalisation of the regional aid guidelines post 2013.

10.45 am

These tough economic times point up the significant challenges facing local banks. The Government and the Executive recognise that difficulties in accessing finance remain a major concern for local businesses. In particular, a significant number of local businesses are currently constrained by the repayments required on loans taken for past property investments. That property overhang means

that those businesses can no longer access the working capital they need to operate or to develop new opportunities, and that presents a risk to economic recovery. The ability of businesses to access necessary finance is a key challenge facing the local economy at the present time. The Executive have taken measures, principally through Invest Northern Ireland, to develop alternative sources of funding for local businesses. Ministers continue to press the banks that operate locally to increase lending and to make full use of the range of UK-wide schemes that have been introduced to help.

The Executive have noted the Government's recognition that UK-wide schemes to improve the flow of finance to businesses have not been as effective in Northern Ireland as they have been elsewhere. They welcome the commitment to ensure that UK-wide schemes are better promoted and deliver a positive impact in the local economy. That includes extension of the start-up loan scheme and a potential pilot extension of the enterprise finance guarantee scheme here. The creation of a joint ministerial task force to examine how access to finance can be improved is a necessary step. That is an issue that is critical to the Province's economic recovery and rebalancing efforts, and only through such formal engagement will it have a real chance of tackling the problems facing the local banking sector.

The Finance Minister met the Economic Secretary to the Treasury last month to discuss what he believed needed to be done, including some quite fundamental changes to enable increased lending to businesses. The Executive are pleased that the Government now recognise that a regional response to our banking issues is required. The point of this is to make sure that Northern Ireland's particular circumstances are fully taken into account when national schemes to improve access to finance are being designed.

Importantly, the package also contains measures for increased support for trade and investment, and the Executive are delighted by the Prime Minister's decision to return to Northern Ireland for the Executive's G8 investment conference in October. In particular, the Executive welcome the associated commitment to further champion jobs and growth locally by strengthening and deepening the linkages between UKTI and Invest NI.

The Executive are encouraged by the UK Government's commitment to work with them to

identify improvements that can be made to various export finance support mechanisms. The continuing UK Government commitment to support R&D projects in the aerospace sector is also very much appreciated, as those measures will complement the priority that the Executive have given to growing the local economy through export-led growth and investment in R&D and innovation.

In the area of tourism, the proposals in the package to develop visa waiver arrangements between the UK and Ireland have considerable scope for impact. In the longer term, the measure will allow visitors from a range of overseas destinations to enter Northern Ireland and Great Britain on an Irish visa. The development of a pilot scheme will provide the platform to help realise the Executive's ambition to make tourism a £1 billion industry by 2020. The visa arrangement will make it easier for tourists and businesspeople visiting the Republic of Ireland who are travelling only on an Irish visa to include Northern Ireland in their trip. It is hoped that that measure will provide an important boost to the Executive's drive to increase tourism revenue and visitor numbers.

Mr Speaker, you will appreciate that the economic package is quite wide-ranging and contains more detail than today's business will allow, so, if I may, I will finish by itemising the measures very briefly in the time that is left.

The Government have made it clear that they are willing to designate enterprise zones here, and the Executive have the option of proposing such sites by October this year, if they so desire.

The Government have also said that they will support the Executive in undertaking a review of business red tape in Northern Ireland. Meanwhile, the package also includes commitments to support the unlocking of key local infrastructure using UK Government guarantees. As previously highlighted, the package also supports the Executive's new process for economically significant planning applications. The Government are also to support the Executive in examining how the financial potential of Belfast port might be unlocked. Then, there are measures to unlock revenues from the Executive's asset base. The potential provision of further MoD surplus assets is detailed. The package also includes measures to build on the local economy's strong communications infrastructure.

The Executive are also exploring what can be done to improve Northern Ireland's air connectivity. Among the proposals is one to

establish monitoring mechanisms at ministerial and official level to ensure that measures implemented by the UK Government are having maximum impact in the local economy. That includes exploring scope for DETI's independent economic advisory group to have a role in monitoring the effectiveness of UK-wide economic policies. We will work to examine how we can contribute to supporting the drive for economic growth here and the creation of a shared society with equality of opportunity for all.

I think that all Members should be able to recognise the progress that has been made. The world leaders came to Fermanagh several weeks ago. They admired a society that has been transformed. At the G8, Northern Ireland showed the world that it is an increasingly outward-looking society, open for business, focusing on the steps needed to succeed in a competitive global economy and ready to address its divisions.

The economic and social pact that was unveiled by the Prime Minister in recent days is a potent symbol of the Executive's vision. Under their custodianship and direction, the Northern Ireland of the future will be a genuinely shared society that is able to fulfil its real economic potential and lay permanent foundations for continued peace, stability and prosperity. The script has been written. Now, the words must be translated into action. I commend the package to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Chris Lyttle, the Deputy Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I warn the House that quite a number of Members want to make a contribution on the statement. I understand that because of the importance of the statement, but I warn Members that they should not make a long pre-ambule before they come to their question. I believe that we can allow everybody to make their contribution. Of course, the Deputy Chair of the OFMDFM Committee will have quite a bit of latitude, as will other Chairs and Deputy Chairs.

Mr Lyttle (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the First Minister for the statement and welcome what appears to be a long overdue acknowledgement that the economic well-being of people in Northern Ireland is absolutely linked to the delivery of a shared and integrated society here. I hope, therefore, that the Assembly will see a detailed action plan for the

delivery of the Together: Building a United Community strategy without delay.

I ask this question as Deputy Chairperson for the OFMDFM Committee: how will the additional €50 million committed by the UK Government to Peace programmes in Northern Ireland be used by the United Youth programme and over what period does the First Minister envisage the 10,000 placements being created? I ask this question as a Member of the Assembly: to what extent will the use of the economic package to deliver 10 shared education campuses over the next five years without reference to integrated education improve a system that the First Minister believes is fundamentally wrong and does it adequately reflect the hopes of our community to see our children educated together?

Mr P Robinson: Mr Speaker, we were not quite clear on this side, when you referred to "pre-ambule", whether it was a "pre-ambule" or a "pre-ambule" that we were talking about.

I will deal with some of the issues that were raised by the Member for East Belfast. First, it is not long overdue. The deputy First Minister and I have consistently seen having a stable and shared society as a fundamental part of bringing prosperity to Northern Ireland. As far as the action plan that arises out of the strategic document is concerned, each of the Departments, having now agreed to the delivery of the plan — I am pleased to say that it was agreed unanimously at the Executive that we would deliver on the plan — will, obviously, look at their own responsibilities in it and bring forward action plans. I hope that each of the Committees will question their Minister and ensure that the Department makes the necessary progress. Following the particular proposals that the deputy First Minister and I announced on 9 May, Departments are already working on detailed proposals. As each comes forward, we will announce it, and we will be happy to answer questions on those issues in the House or in Committees.

On the €50 million designated by the UK Government as additional to the Peace IV funding and specifically linked to the United Youth project, when detailed proposals come from officials on how that proposal is to be taken forward, I imagine that they will likely seek the engagement of community, charitable and business organisations. No doubt, as part of that, proposals will go before the SEUPB for Peace funding specifically to take forward projects for the United Youth project.

As far as the campuses are concerned, the document that we produced makes it very clear that our ultimate goal is one educational system in Northern Ireland. We recognise that that cannot be done overnight, in one step or in one visit to the table. It must be an ongoing, gradual, step-by-step process, however tiring and hard on the patience it may be for the Member to see progress being made more slowly than he and, indeed, I would like. Nonetheless, it is a significant step forward. It is important that actual proposals start to be constructed on the ground. As the Executive recognised, it is the starting point. It is not the Executive's full ambition for shared or integrated education. The Member will know, from the visit that the deputy First Minister and I made to the Committee, that we identified other areas relating to integrated education where, we believed, further work was necessary. That conversation will continue, and consideration will be given to what further steps can be taken to encourage the sector.

Mr Moutray: I welcome the positive and timely statement by the First Minister this morning. How does he believe the economic pact and Together: Building a United Community sit together as we move forward?

Mr P Robinson: We have consistently identified that the one critical element to having a stable and prosperous future for the people of Northern Ireland is that the peace is embedded, there is cohesion in our community and we seek to reconcile different traditions so that they can live together, side by side. Unless we have political and community stability, we will not be an attractive place for people to invest or visit. It has consistently been our policy that there are two key priorities for the Executive: the economy and building a shared society. The fact that the programme has been endorsed by the United Kingdom Government, the Irish Government, the US Government and the European Governments indicates that this is the right way to travel. I think that any sensible person looking at where Northern Ireland is and at its potential will recognise that it is the right way forward.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister for his statement this morning. What is his assessment of the benefits of the North continuing to have assisted area status?

Mr P Robinson: When it was first mooted that there was the potential for it to be removed, there was considerable concern from every party in the Executive. The deputy First

Minister and I went to Brussels and spoke to a wide range of commissioners, parliamentarians and others, including the two presidents, about how important it was for Northern Ireland to continue to have that status. Without that status and without having the power to set our own level of corporation tax, Northern Ireland would be very vulnerable, and it would have been difficult for us to attract the same level of investment as we have been successful in bringing to Northern Ireland over the past number of years. So, from our point of view, it was a vital issue and one that we are delighted has been satisfactorily resolved, albeit for the short and medium term. I suspect that that is at least to take account of what the outcome in 2014 might be of the United Kingdom Government's decision on corporation tax. If we have those tax-setting powers, obviously, other criteria will have to be considered in terms of assisted area status.

11.00 am

Mr Eastwood: I welcome the potential for further military sites to be transferred. However, given some of the experiences that we have had, will the potentially significant cost of decontaminating such sites be left to the Executive's resources, or will it be covered by the additional borrowing powers?

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

Mr P Robinson: I suppose that depends largely on which military sites we are talking about or, indeed, which parts of military sites. If, for instance, as, I think, was indicated in the document — it certainly was in our discussions with the Prime Minister — we were talking about sites that included existing housing, clearly, there are not decontamination issues where there is such housing. On some of the sites that we have taken over, the decontamination relates to only a small part of the overall site. Cleverer planning use of the site's overall footprint might avoid the necessity to spend significant amounts of money on decontamination. Ultimately, however, where decontamination is required, it will be a matter of negotiation at the time on a particular site between the Executive and the UK Government.

Mr Cree: I welcome the statement this morning. The First Minister referred to the UK-wide schemes to improve the flow of finance, with which there certainly have been problems. What new tools that have not existed before are envisaged for that? I welcome the assisted area status extension and the selective financial

assistance going beyond 2014. Can the First Minister give us some indication about how far ahead they may go?

Mr P Robinson: I think that every one of us will have had conversations with people in our constituency about the difficulty getting access to finance, in particular for small businesses. The banks have been a significant problem. Of course, every time you meet the banks, they throw figures at you about how excellent their lending has been and how it has increased. What they do not tell you is what they have reined in at the other end. They do not tell you about the increases that there have been in the terms and conditions of loans. So, there have been difficulties, and it is more difficult in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, because none of the four main banks is indigenous to Northern Ireland. That has given us considerable problems.

Many of the significant schemes that the UK Government have brought forward on the flow of finance are of such a scale that they do not have the same impact in Northern Ireland. I remember that, several years ago, the deputy First Minister and I wrote to the Chancellor drawing attention to the fact that the Northern Ireland banking scene was entirely different and could not be treated in the same way as that elsewhere in the UK. We asked them to look specifically at that. It has taken them some time to come around to that position. I am delighted that they now have and that they are going to sit down with us and look at those issues. I am glad that we have a mechanism in the pact that allows us to have periodic meetings where we can raise these issues to see what progress has been made.

We have the assisted area status guarantee for the short and medium term. I suspect that that really means that, if, at a later stage, we get the power to set our own level of corporation tax, we will look again at assisted area status.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the additional borrowing of £50 million a year for the next two financial years to be spent on society projects. Is the First Minister confident that the necessary processes are in place to allow that money to be spent in the available time?

Mr P Robinson: That touches on an issue that I mentioned during the OFMDFM Committee session. It is challenging to be told that there are two years and you will have the ability to borrow £50 million in each of those years. The processes of government — getting through the preparation, the planning and the

legal and procurement requirements — make that very challenging. That may be one of the good reasons why there should be a fast-track planning system. The borrowing ability also requires the Finance Minister to look again at how we can speed up the procurement system and make it more favourable to local companies. Those are issues that have to be looked at.

The Department of Finance and Personnel has indicated that it is confident that we can use the money within the timescale. As the Member knows, some schemes — Lisanelly, for instance — have already been identified. It is good to see that we now have six schools signed up to the memorandum of understanding to move forward on the Lisanelly site. A lot of the preparation is already under way for that site. There are also two schools in Moy that want to come together in one building. As soon as there is willingness on the part of those who would be your partners, it becomes a lot easier to go through the processes. I am confident that we can meet the schedule.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he give an indication of what shared future projects could benefit from the economic package? Is there something in the document that could fast-track the Lisanelly project?

Mr P Robinson: There are several funding elements. First, there is the commitment by the Executive to the overall shared future projects. That means that those projects come high on the list for government expenditure when it becomes available. I will come to the pact in a moment or two, but, on our own terms, that means that we will look to the priorities that we have set ourselves in monitoring rounds and so forth.

I have already spoken about Lisanelly, and it is ahead of the pack in terms of shared education campuses because a lot of work has been done and there seems to be an agreement to go on to the site. All the projects that we have outlined in the proposals of 9 May are capable of receiving funding through the pact because the reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing increase can be used for any of them. The increase in Peace IV funding through the top-up allows the United Youth programme in particular to be advantaged.

The Executive have made it clear to the Treasury and others that we have the programmes that can move us forward to build a united community in Northern Ireland. Those programmes will run at a pace consistent with

the available finance, so, if there is enthusiasm on the part of the Government to help us with them, they know how they can help us. The more money and the more available borrowing we have, the more we can do to advance the projects. I am encouraged that there is a lot that can be done. My only concern is as it has always been: with capital funding, there is a long lead-in time for procurement, legal and planning purposes.

Mrs Hale: I thank the First Minister for his statement and answers and welcome the positive news in the statement. The economic pact indicates that consideration will be given to additional fiscal powers for the Assembly. What powers are likely to be considered, and how likely is it that there will be further devolution?

Mr P Robinson: I tense up when people talk about additional fiscal powers, simply because I think that, very often, people have a different view of the outcome from what is envisaged in the pact. The pact talks about the additional powers as a consequence of wanting to increase our borrowing capacity. It states that we can increase our borrowing as long as we increase our revenues, and, if the revenue stream is increased, that can pay off whatever additional borrowing we do. However, when most people talk to me about taking additional fiscal powers, they talk about things such as stamp duty, landfill tax and the aggregates level, and I know full well that they are talking about reducing the tax paid on all of those, which would do nothing to pay for additional borrowing. Whether we pay for additional borrowing through increasing the regional rate or through some other mechanism is something that we will consider in the days ahead. I am concerned that the only ideas that I have been hearing from people are, I suspect, ones that, just like air passenger duty (APD), involve bringing the tax to zero.

Mr Byrne: I generally welcome the thrust of the statement. It is positive in its concentration on developing a more balanced regional economy. Given that we have secured better structural funds, that selective financial assistance is retained and that, hopefully, we will benefit from the regional guidelines, will the First Minister and the Executive consider seeking from the Treasury corporate tax credits that will allow greater allowances on capital investment? That was announced in 1998 by the then Chancellor Gordon Brown for two years, and we benefited from it. Given that the whole argument about corporation tax is still in the melting pot, that may be a way of reducing net tax on our —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that the Member has asked his question.

Mr Byrne: — corporate businesses.

Mr P Robinson: I agree entirely. I assure you that we have already been attempting to entice the Government to assist us in that regard. We will continue to do so. It is fair to say that, to date, the Treasury is not biting.

Mr Weir: I thank the First Minister for his detailed and very positive statement. Is he confident that the necessary work to allow a decision on the devolution of corporation tax to be taken in the autumn of 2014 will be done? What significance is there to the decision to legislate by way of a stand-alone Bill?

Mr P Robinson: The Government have committed themselves to doing that work and completing it so that they can take a decision. We keep talking about the autumn of 2014; more accurately, we are talking about after the Scottish referendum. We have done a considerable amount of the preparatory work jointly with the Treasury, the Northern Ireland Office and the Prime Minister. However, the report submitted to the Prime Minister left him with options in at least three areas. Therefore, he will have to decide which of those options to take forward. Needless to say, the options favoured by the Executive and not by the Treasury are those that are best for Northern Ireland and the Executive financially. When we get close to the decision-taking stage, we will attempt to convince the Prime Minister that that is the right way to go.

The second part of the Member's question —

Mr Weir: It was about the stand-alone Bill.

Mr P Robinson: I think that it is reasonably well known that the initial proposal was to make a decision in the autumn of 2014 and use the Finance Bill of 2015, which would be the normal way of dealing with these matters, as the means of taking forward the proposal if it were approved by the Government. Of course, those of us who have some knowledge of how the last Finance Bill of a Parliament operates will know that, because nobody is absolutely certain which party will be in government after the election, it has to be an agreed Finance Bill. I think that we all know that the Labour Party has not been positive about having a devolved corporation tax-setting power for Northern Ireland. That being the case, leaving it to the Finance Bill of 2015 would have meant that there would be a veto. The Conservative Party

and Liberal Democrats in coalition could have brought forward a proposal to provide Northern Ireland with tax-setting powers that would have been vetoed in the Finance Bill by the Labour Opposition. That would not have been satisfactory from our point of view. The pact, as finally published, commits the Government, if they take a decision in favour of allowing Northern Ireland to have tax-setting powers in 2014, to introducing a stand-alone Bill that they will seek to take through Parliament before the elections in 2015.

11.15 am

Mr Anderson: I also welcome the First Minister's statement. Undoubtedly, the G8 was a massive success for Northern Ireland. Does the First Minister believe that there will be a long-term legacy from the G8 and the G8 investment conference?

Mr P Robinson: I think that everyone, even our pessimists in the press, recognised that the G8 was successful in Northern Ireland terms. Although we will attempt to indicate the extent of the advantage to Northern Ireland in the longer term in the report that will be carried out by the Executive, it is difficult to know that. At the moment and from our angle of vision, we see it being beneficial not just in reputational enhancement for Northern Ireland. People around the world will have seen that Northern Ireland is a bright, sunny and peaceful place and the kind of destination that one might want to go to on holiday or to invest in. That is good for Northern Ireland, but I am not sure what figure anybody could put on that.

It is also important that the Prime Minister committed to supporting our economic conference in October and encouraged his G8 colleagues to do likewise. That could realise considerable benefits as previous events of that type have done. In the long term, the G8 will be a tool for Invest Northern Ireland, Tourism Ireland and the Northern Ireland Tourist Board to use to show that Northern Ireland is a welcoming and inviting place. All of that has to be to our advantage, and only time will tell the extent to which we take advantage of it.

Lord Morrow: I, too, thank the First Minister for his comprehensive statement to the House. I want to bring him back to an issue that he dealt with to some degree when Mr Robinson asked his question. It relates to the creation of 10 shared educational campuses in five years' time. How many of those campuses have been identified? Is he confident that 10 campuses will be identified within the five-year period?

Mr P Robinson: I hope that they will be more than identified within that five-year period; I hope that we will see work commence on 10 of them within that period. Of course, there are those that are publicly known, and Lisanelly has been referred to. The Moy project is also known, and I welcomed the opportunity to go along with the Member to speak to the two schools in Moy. It is always so much easier when you have willing partners and people who want to make a project work. That will help Lisanelly and Moy. I understand that proposals are also being put forward in Armagh. I think that a trend is being set and you will see others following.

It will be the responsibility of the Education Minister to bring the proposals to his Executive colleagues. I hope that we end up having to choose 10 campuses, rather than having to go out and twist arms to get 10. I honestly believe that there is a real opportunity for groups of schools to look at this proposal as a way of getting greater integration in their community and improving educational prospects.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire as ucht a ráitis, agus, go deimhin, cuirim fáilte roimhe. Tá suim ar leith agam sa £18 billiún d'airgead caipitil atá luaite ann.

I thank the First Minister for his statement and welcome it. I am particularly interested in the £18 billion of capital funding mentioned in the statement. How much of that has been delivered to date? How much remains to be delivered?

Mr P Robinson: The Member will know that, right across the House, there was considerable concern about the gap between the commitment that had been made by the outgoing Labour Administration and the plans that were produced by the coalition Government. The coalition Government had indicated that they believed that the £18 billion could be met within the time frame entered into by the previous Administration.

Over the past year in particular there have been step changes in the Government's commitment to capital funding for Northern Ireland, and literally hundreds of millions of pounds have been added to the capital budget. The cynics might well say that there have been reductions or freezes on the revenue side to allow for increases on the capital side, but if we are to stick to the letter of the agreement, there have been increases. I think that the last paper I saw

from the Department of Finance indicated that the present projections — this was before the statement from the Treasury in the past few days — were that we would have received something in the region of £17.56 billion. The additional figures that have been added to the capital budget by the Chancellor's statement more recently must take it very close to the £18 billion, if not exceeding the £18 billion mark.

Mr Newton: Like others, I welcome the Minister's very positive statement. It is good to end the term on such a positive and high note. Reference has already been made to the assisted area status. Like others, I welcome the retention of that. Perhaps the First Minister will comment on the importance of that status to long-term investment and securing foreign investment in the Province.

Mr P Robinson: In my statement I pointed out just how helpful that had been over the past year, when 7,500 jobs were brought in directly as a result of our ability to give assisted area status. Moreover, in the past three months in particular, around 3,000 jobs have come into Northern Ireland, so it is a fantastic lever to be able to go to a company and say, "If you come to Northern Ireland, we can give you assistance". What assistance you give and in what areas you give it depends largely on what type of businesses we are trying to attract. Assisted area status allows us to lever in jobs in a way that would make us very uncompetitive if we did not have it because it allows us to give funding, which can offset the advantage that companies might receive if they were to put themselves in a region that had a lower level of corporation tax, for instance. So it is massively important that we continue to have that status. It is a tool that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Invest Northern Ireland have used very successfully. There were considerable concerns, and, indeed, some calculations being carried out, as to what the consequences would be if that status had been taken away from us or it had been to a reduced part of Northern Ireland.

Mr I McCrea: I thank the First Minister for his statement and welcome the nature of its content. I also welcome the early progress in relation to the planning system. Does the First Minister believe that the amended Planning Bill will offer a real opportunity to speed up the planning system and help attract inward investment?

Mr P Robinson: I know that, with any proposal that is brought before the House, there are always some people who want to try to get

some political advantage for their political party out of it, but, quite frankly, anybody who has travelled around the world trying to bring business to Northern Ireland, and has spoken to those who want to invest, but who find our planning delays so frustrating, will know that anything that can be done to fast-track those and improve Northern Ireland's reputation abroad is helpful. If we are able to speak to investors and indicate that there are issues that we can help to resolve, and we can do it within a time frame, it makes it much easier for DETI and Invest Northern Ireland to attract people. So, yes, obviously, being able to take decisions faster helps our economy, helps get people into jobs and helps get people out of poverty. That is the real issue, and I would have thought that that would be vastly welcomed in a community that requires growth in the economy in order to trigger people getting off the dole and into work, out of poverty and into prosperity.

Mr Douglas: I welcome the First Minister's very positive statement, which is good news for Northern Ireland. The economic package refers to the Port of Belfast, and recent reports show that the port has had another very successful and profitable year. What do the Executive have in mind to ensure that Northern Ireland benefits from the work of the port?

Mr P Robinson: Northern Ireland already benefits from the work of the port. It is the gateway for business into Northern Ireland, and it does a tremendous job in encouraging investment in its area. The DONG proposal is a perfect example of that. Anyone who looks at the skyline around the port and at the work that DONG has undertaken can see just how valuable that is economically and for jobs. However, we have to recognise that it is more than a port. The core port land is one issue, but there is massive development potential, with some thousands of acres available. I do not know what the current Minister's position is, or what guidance he is getting, but when I was in the Department for Regional Development and was being asked to appoint people to the board of the port, the criteria that I was given were all marine-related. The fact is that the job that the port is doing is not just marine-related any longer; it is a massive development organisation.

Therefore, from a Northern Ireland plc point of view — I do not really like that term — the benefits should be not just to the port users and the port itself but to the wider community in Northern Ireland. As things stand, the fiduciary responsibility of the commissioners would not allow them to throw money away to the Executive. However, the Executive would have

the ability to change the criteria, and although the port "lawyered up" when mention was first made of it, the pact makes very clear that the United Kingdom Government will give us whatever additional support we might need if legislation was required in the UK so that the wider community could get some benefit from the port assets.

This all started, as the Member will remember, when the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in his Budget statement, sought to get additional funds from various sources outside the normal revenue streams. He had looked at getting £20 million from the port, which the port resisted, and, therefore, we are looking at other mechanisms that will allow us to do that.

I am convinced that that revenue is there to be had, but I am insistent that in bringing that additional revenue to Northern Ireland, looking at how the port operates, I do not want us to take any step that makes it less favourable for the port to do the job that it has successfully been doing. The Member referred to the significant profits that it has raised, the side effects of which include the recent proposal to spend £7 million on a docking facility for tour boats.

All of that is beneficial, and the Executive will look at that on the basis of a proposal that, I suspect, will come forward from the Minister for Regional Development.

Mr Allister: In his statement, the First Minister refers to the Executive's vision of:

"A community strengthened by its diversity, in which cultural expression is celebrated and embraced ... free from prejudice, hate and intolerance."

He also told us:

"every Minister has committed to the delivery of the strategy."

How can that be squared with the performance of the Culture Minister, who, in recent weeks, led protests against expressions of unionist culture? Has the First Minister any comment to make about her behaviour?

Mr P Robinson: The Member wants to stretch me beyond the scope of the statement. Every Minister must answer for their behaviour and how consistent it is with the agreements of the Executive. The Executive have very clearly recognised that the way forward for Northern Ireland is one where we each show respect for

the other's traditions, where we have an understanding of the difficulties and the angle of vision that people may have from their community, and where there is a wider level of tolerance. That has to be the way forward. I encourage the Member in the same way that I encourage every other Member: if we all are in tune with those criteria, we will have a very peaceful parading season and a very peaceful Northern Ireland. That will allow us to be able to meet one of the two criteria that we want to achieve, namely the establishment of a shared community, the other one being economy prosperity for our people.

11.30 am

Mr Agnew: The First Minister's opening sentence was telling when he referred to the economic package, 'Building a Prosperous and United Community, because that is what this is. It is an economic programme rebranded and repackaged as a shared future document. Although there have been some welcome headline targets on delivering a shared future, there has been no strategy on how we get there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr Agnew: Indeed, the content of the statement is almost exclusively about the economy. Is the statement an admission from the Executive that they have given up on delivering a shared future strategy?

Mr P Robinson: Has the Member been on holiday? Where was he on 23 May? Is he not aware that we have produced the strategy on building a united community? Did he not listen to my statement, in which I indicated that the Executive have unanimously supported this being the starting point and that they will seek to deliver it? The strategy is there for building a united community. Perhaps, the Member will go to the Library and get a copy of it.

Mrs Overend: I want to ask the First Minister about the fiscal powers. Will he outline what powers are being considered for devolution to Northern Ireland? Who will be driving forward the examination?

Mr P Robinson: I have already touched on the powers. People have talked to us about the aggregates levy, the landfill tax and stamp duty. The proposal is obviously one that would have to come forward from the Department of Finance and Personnel to the Executive. The Executive will want to consult widely with the

Committees and the Assembly on moving forward on any proposal.

We have considerable powers through our regional rate, which is, in effect, a local tax. If we want to increase the local tax to pay for an addition to the RRI borrowing, we can simply do that by increasing our regional rate. It is up to anybody who has a suggestion to make about additional areas of tax to make, but my fear is that when people talk about taxes, they talk about reducing them rather than putting up tax and indicating what they will be charging that additional tax for.

Planning Policy Statement 2: Natural Heritage

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Following Executive agreement, I am issuing Planning Policy Statement 2 (PPS 2) on natural heritage. So that people are aware, natural heritage refers to the diversity of our habitats, species, landscape and earth-science features.

In the past few weeks, as Members know, I have brought to the Assembly PPS 16 on tourism, which is aimed at supporting high-quality and sustainable tourist development to maximise the economic opportunities that tourism offers. For Members' information, yesterday, I circulated a PPS on flood areas to the Executive. That is all evidence of the reform of planning.

Work has commenced on developing a single, strategic planning policy statement to be in place in the early months of 2015 to gather in one place the planning policy ambitions and statements of this part of the world. Members will recall — how could you forget? — that, last week, there was a debate on the Planning Bill, which focused on streamlining and reforming the planning system and ensuring that economic considerations are embedded in the system in the proper way. I have always maintained that the planning system is about striking the appropriate balance between facilitating development in support of the economy and protecting and enhancing our natural and built heritage. The reason is clear-cut: as I keep saying, the scale, wonder and beauty of our built, natural, archaeological and Christian heritage is unsurpassed on these islands. This statement today and the adoption of PPS 2 by the Executive, unanimously and without dispute — to borrow the phrase used by the First Minister in his previous comments — is a useful rebuttal to the bad politics and bad law of last Monday and Tuesday.

Today, I am launching PPS 2 on natural heritage, which is a policy aimed specifically at preserving and enhancing all that we cherish about our unique natural heritage in the North. It extends beyond and enhances the old PPS 2, which dates back to June 1997 and dealt only with natural conservations. It is interesting that, in a statement issued today, the chair of the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), Patrick Casement, acknowledges that this PPS moves us beyond conservation and deals more comprehensively with heritage.

The policy seeks to conserve, enhance and restore the abundance, quality, diversity and distinctiveness of our natural heritage. It protects designated sites at international, national and local level; statutorily protected species; other species; habitats or features of natural heritage importance; and areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs). The PPS better informs applicants of the types of surveys and assessments that may be requested as part of the development management process. All of that is timely, given how, even in recent legal challenges, issues around compliance with European standards have been questioned by the courts.

PPS 2 will help us to meet international, national and local responsibilities and obligations. It will help us to achieve important obligations under the biodiversity convention, the European Landscape Convention and commitments made through the Northern Ireland biodiversity strategy, as well as to further sustainable development. It provides flexibility to accommodate development for economic growth without compromising the need to protect the valuable natural heritage. Underlying PPS 2 is the principle that conservation and development can be compatible and that, with careful planning, the potential for conflict can be minimised. I have just come from a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture at which the first item on the agenda was the work that we have taken forward together to try to protect Strangford lough, in particular how we have been able to reconcile the economic, energy and environmental needs, given the tidal turbine that exists in the middle of the narrows.

The policy encourages development plans to take account of natural heritage issues during their preparation by identifying and protecting local sites of importance and biodiversity. Plans are an important tool now — as they are for councils in the future, given their planning and developing planning functions — in evaluating and reconciling any potential conflict

between the need for development and the need to protect the environment.

PPS 2 also provides a set of six operational planning policies to be taken into account when determining planning applications. In the document, NH 1 to NH 6, respectively and inclusively, are the pathway for dealing with all the relevant designations and how the planning system needs to acknowledge and respect those in any development plan or planning application. The first of the operational policies focuses on the protection of European sites and listed or proposed Ramsar sites. Those are given the highest level of protection, in line with the EC birds and habitats directives and the Ramsar convention. The process for considering development proposals affecting European sites is set out in law. Nobody can vary from what is set out in law, even though some seem to think that they can. Particular species of flora and fauna are subject to special protection and are protected from harm as required by legislation at European and domestic level.

PPS 2 also contains policy provisions aimed at providing the necessary protection for statutory protected species. The policy indicates different tests for those species depending on whether they are protected through the Wildlife Order, the 2011 Wildlife and Natural Environment Act or European legislation.

The policy also provides protection against the adverse effects of development proposals in nationally important sites such as areas of special scientific interest and national nature reserves. Similarly, it contains policy provisions that protect local nature reserves against the potentially adverse effects of development. It makes good sense to retain the hierarchy of protection for our nature conservation sites by providing the right level of protection for the appropriate designation.

Flexibility has been built into the policy to allow for development, provided the benefits of the proposed development outweigh the value of the designated site at national and local level. Benefits should be of a long-term interest and sufficient to override the value of the site or harm to the natural heritage interest.

However, many of our wildlife, habitats and features of natural heritage importance are not confined to designated sites, and PPS 2 recognises that by also protecting non-designated landscape features, wetlands and long-established woodlands. This shows the inclusive nature of the PPS. It goes across the hierarchy of designation from that required

under European requirements through to non-designated landscapes such as wetlands, woodlands and trees.

PPS 2 also contains policy provisions for development in areas of outstanding natural beauty. All development proposals in those designated areas will have to meet special design criteria. That will minimise the effects on the distinctive character of the protected landscapes. The policy complements that in PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside and the accompanying supplementary planning guidance 'Building on Tradition: A Sustainable Design Guide for the Northern Ireland Countryside.'

I believe that the policy provides the necessary protection for natural heritage areas that are designated by environmental legislation and those deemed to be of particular importance to Northern Ireland. It does so in a way that allows appropriate development to take place subject to necessary mitigation. It is further evidence of my desire to use planning to facilitate growth and to protect and enhance our valuable natural heritage. Although I use those words cautiously, and nothing too much should be read into them, this planning policy statement captures the three pillars — avoid, mitigate and compensate — when it comes to areas of heritage value that have designations. That is what the PPS does. I hope that, in going forward, other parties, other Ministers and all of government recognise that that is the way to have a proper planning system.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I very much welcome the Minister's announcement of enhanced protection for our natural heritage. We are so blessed in Northern Ireland with such a rich natural and built heritage. As the Minister is aware, UNESCO has recommended that we need legal protection for our world heritage site. I put in an amendment as an Alliance member, but it was not supported. Will the Minister consider legislating to support our only world heritage site in Northern Ireland?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Chair for her comments and for all the work of the Environment Committee through the past term. She was right to use the word "blessed". Whether what we enjoy is God-given or a consequence of other reasons, we are blessed, and that word rightly acknowledges the scale, wonder and beauty of the heritage all around us.

In the debate last week, I read into the record — I did not even read all of what I wanted to

into the record — how we already protect heritage sites and, in particular, how we have a suite of measures, policy and practice that protects the world heritage site. Nobody said that that was inadequate, save what the Member said about her proposal and the law on the world heritage site.

11.45 am

There is a scale of measures that already protect. That is why development in the world heritage site and in the area of outstanding value is only allowed in exceptional circumstances. The proof of that has been what has happened with the planning history of that part of Northern Ireland. At a meeting last Thursday, I put my issues around the world heritage site and the conduct of UNESCO and its advisers the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to Mr Simon Jenkins, the chair of the National Trust. Although he made the point that his view is that there is a requirement for further law, that point has not yet prevailed with the Governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales or the London Government. That argument has not prevailed to date, but, in a long and probing meeting in which I asked all the hard questions of the National Trust, Mr Jenkins indicated to me very clearly that, whatever about the legal issue, in his view, the planning application on lands adjacent to the world heritage site is now settled.

Mr Hamilton: I welcome the Minister's statement, at least the bits that were in the printed version. I am disappointed that the Minister is not making his statement on PPS 21 today. He has been working on that for two years, and many of us had hoped that it would be here before now. If the rumour mill around this place is right, I hope that the Minister has the time to get it printed as a written statement and into Members' pigeon holes before the end of this week.

In the Minister's statement, he made reference to flexibility being built into the policy to allow for development where that proposed development outweighs the value of the designated site at national and local level. Following on from what the Chair asked, what criteria does the Minister see being applied to such circumstances that would determine whether it would outweigh the national or the local designation?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. As I have tried to demonstrate even in the past 20 minutes, I have always thought that you should try to add a bit of colour to what

otherwise might be seen as somewhat dry statements to the House and even add some political comment that might be timely and cutting, or not, depending on how you might view it. The measure of the best politicians is to not rely upon the rumour mill for anything but to rely upon the evidence and the facts. We will see what the evidence and the facts are whenever evidence and facts begin to emerge.

The answer to his question is that, as Patrick Casement said in the CNCC statement this morning, there are now policy tests on each and every designation from the range that we have in the North. Whether that is the highest designation of European and Ramsar sites, sites of species or nature conservation importance, national or local, habitat species or areas of outstanding natural beauty, the tests are all outlined in pages 11 to 17 of the PPS. I do not intend to go through all of those, but those are the tests, and any application of a development plan must be judged against each and all of those tests. So, to answer the Member's question, when it comes to any one or other application, that application will have to be judged against the test that is outlined in respect of the area of designation in which that application is located. Therefore, there will be various tests at various times on various locations against the various standards in NH 1 to NH 6 respectively. In respect of the highest designation, as the decisions that were made on the Giant's Causeway or the Runkerry proposal indicate, those tests are exhaustive and extensive. Only on the far side of all the tests, was, in exceptional circumstances, a decision to approve given.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement. What European regulations or measures have influenced this PPS, and what extra protection will it mean for our natural heritage?

Mr Attwood: As I indicated, the previous approach of the 1997 PPS 2 was to focus on nature conservation. By definition, nature conservation is a limited term. The purpose of this PPS is to broaden policy from conservation to heritage generally. It looks at six different streams of heritage when it comes to designations in the North and what planning policy should or should not apply to each.

To answer the Member's point about EU law, when it comes to issues of heritage, there are four directives, two of which are particularly relevant and two of which are relevant in the round. The first two directives are in respect of

birds, which deal with designations known as special protection areas (SPAs), and habitats, where designations are known as special areas of conservation (SACs). Together those are known as Natura 2000 sites. They are the highest designation. However, in informing planning decisions, two other directives are relevant, namely the marine strategy framework directive and — the fourth has gone out of my head. There is also the Ramsar wetlands convention. Those are the highest designations. Those are the streams of European law that inform the thinking behind this PPS. In addition, there is national law: the Wildlife Order, and the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act. There is also local legislation that informs some other planning policy guidance. When you take all that together — the European, domestic and national legislation — you come up with all the law that is at the heart of this planning policy statement.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, I wonder whether you could give us some indication of your assessment of the scope to further develop and take advantage of the tourist potential of our natural and built heritage.

Mr Attwood: I was slightly worried there because, normally, Dolores is to my left, and now she is behind me. The truth of the matter is that Dolores is normally in front of me, because I am following her.

In answer to her question, I refer to this policy statement and the previous policy statement that came before the House in respect of tourism. If you take both of those, they assert very strongly that there is a wonder of heritage here that, in law, policy and practice, we have to protect when it comes to planning decisions and development plans. On the other hand, the tourism statement says that there are opportunities for sustainable and high-quality development in settlements and rural areas. PPS 16 outlines and scopes what that might look at. Ultimately, however, whatever the policy and the law might be, people have to break through and recognise that you can protect our heritage — we must, because it is a big part of the character of our lives — and, at the same time, positively develop that heritage. That argument is beginning to be more fully understood. I think that it is an argument that was understood by the Tourist Board and the councils that manage heritage assets such as beaches.

More people are beginning to realise that, more than ever, we have a great opportunity to grow our tourism to a £1 billion a year industry. At

the heart of that is the economic driver of our historic environment. The Department produced a report about 12 months ago, which was adequate but not spectacular in content. If you want to see a spectacular report, look at the sister report that was produced at around the same time by the Office of Public Works in the South on the economic benefit of our historic environment. I think that that narrative is growing. The consequence of that is that the Executive now have to direct resources. We had a report yesterday from the Finance Minister on June monitoring. Useful money was given to DOE to deal with waste crime, environmental crime, dereliction and council funding. That is very welcome, and I want to put that on the record. It was a more generous outcome from monitoring rounds than I have seen in my time at the Executive table. However, the strategic shift has to be made in the September/October monitoring. Will a heritage-led development fund be created that will do a number of heritage-led development projects this year and next? That will be proof positive, and a good answer to the Member's question.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I encourage Members and Ministers to address their remarks through the Chair. Microphones are positioned to ensure that what is said to the Chair is picked up by Hansard and by other Members.

Mr Elliott: I will certainly try to do that. The Minister's statement indicates that flexibility has been built into the policy to allow for development. Will that flexibility extend to those economic or enterprise zones that were proposed in the Planning Bill last week, power over which goes to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister? Could that be in conflict with the planning policy statement outlined by the Minister today?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I indicated in the debate on Monday of last week that there was a model completely like what has been proposed in the amendments from the DUP and Sinn Féin in the economic zone. It is known as a "simplified planning zone". It is built into the body of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. Article 38 of that Act provides that, when it comes to simplified planning zones, respect must be shown for the various designations, some of which I have referred to today. I put that on the record. It is unusual for a Minister to read into the record the legal advice that he has received, because that is privileged information and, if you like, I have waived my privilege to that advice, which is addressed to me.

However, I put that on the record. At no time in the debates of Monday or Tuesday last week did anyone in the House contradict that advice. Certainly, no one from the ranks of the DUP or Sinn Féin contradicted it. Since last Monday or Tuesday, now that a week has passed, despite the comments that have been made on those amendments, I have not heard a word from other parties contradicting the advice that I gave last week. No one said that you could propose or pass law in this Chamber in respect of economic zones that deleted or redacted out of the law the obligations that we have under European law and its designations. I have not heard anyone, at any time — in this Chamber or outside it — from a political, legal or any other background, rebut what I said last week.

I listened closely to what the First Minister said in reply to a question on economic zones. I find it curious that the First Minister somehow wants to portray those who want to do right by law, politics and Europe as somehow doing wrong by those who are out of work. I rebut that. I resent that remark because I would not say to the First Minister, at any time, that he is hostile to the interests of those who are out of work, and he should not visit those sorts of comments on anyone else in any other party. Equally curious is the fact that the First Minister, when he was given an opportunity to say that my legal advice, my opinion and the opinions of all those who disagree with the First Minister and deputy First Minister about the law on this matter are wrong, did not take it. I think the case is closed.

Mr Weir: Returning to the statement itself —

Mr Allister: That was a year ago.

Mr Weir: I hear some heckling from a sedentary position. However, I return to the statement. I am disappointed, as my colleague is, that we will hear from the Minister only once today, rather than twice. The Minister makes specific reference in the third-last paragraph to protection made available to non-designated landscape features. In particular, he mentions wetlands and established woodlands. Will he expand on the protection that will be made available to them?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. I am disappointed that I was unable to have the First Stage of the Local Government Bill yesterday. I have disappointments as well about what is not before us.

Mr Weir: It is a house of sorrows.

12.00 noon

Mr Attwood: It could well be. I am disappointed that we did not have the First Stage and the Second Stage of two pieces of legislation, on local government and road traffic, before the end of the session. That was despite good efforts. There seems to have been some blockage somewhere: even a blockage, it seems to me, in respect of local government around flags, of all things. I will not go back into that, because I commented on that yesterday. So if there is disappointment, let us acknowledge that there is a lot of disappointment. Yes, I had to pull the PPS 21 statement, because I got it late yesterday. I do not mind rewriting questions for oral answer, statements or letters. I have made a practice of it over the past while. I had to rewrite the PPS 21 statement because, in my view, it did not address all the issues in the draft that I thought Members legitimately wanted addressed. I hope that that will be corrected shortly.

There will be protections, and not just for ancient and long-established woodland. That will be of some interest to Members from Derry in respect of Prehen Wood, where I hope to do something in the very near future. However, there are proposals for woodlands and trees. Should woodlands, which, I think, is the sixth element of the advice in the relevant section of the PPS, come under threat from development proposals, my Department can consider tree preservation orders for the protection for those woodlands. In other words, it can protect trees and woods. That may happen anyway, but this planning policy gives further cover for that outcome.

Lord Morrow: The Minister's statement reads very well. I wonder whether he agrees with me that protection and enforcement go hand in hand. We have had some experiences of late where the Department was alerted some five years ago about issues before it took action. What future does the Minister see for the policy that he speaks about today, if it is going to take that length of time in the future to enforce infringements of his policy?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I agree absolutely one hundred per cent with his opening remarks, which were, essentially, when it comes to planning, you need to have good planning, the right protections and robust enforcement. I agree with that; the flip side of good planning is hard enforcement in a proportionate manner going after the worst offenders. For what it is worth, I have tried to develop that narrative in this job

over the past couple of years, and there is some evidence that, on the enforcement side, matters have been escalated. I would like to think that Members would accept that.

As I said before, there have been more urgent works notices served in the past two years than had been served in the previous 40 years. Why was that? The answer is that there were listed buildings at risk, and we decided to go after those in control of those buildings to get them to protect those assets for the wider public interest. We served a completion notice, something that had never been served before, on the Stand Hotel in Portstewart. Beyond that, completion notices will be served on a number of other properties that have been identified by Planning Service. At the moment, conversations are ongoing between those in control of those properties in advance of the completion notices being served in order to drive forward the issue of enforcement.

Action is being taken against illegal car park operators, around which there has been some publicity — indeed, there have been some legal proceedings in recent days in that regard. In one case, I instructed counsel to ensure that we resisted an application for interim relief in relation to a car park at the International Airport where the Planning Appeals Commission had recently found in our favour, and that demonstrates a greater profile of enforcement than there has been heretofore. That is why I made the argument, and the Finance Minister accepted the argument, that an in-year monitoring allocation of £1.5 million should be put into the environmental crime unit to deal with fuel laundering and waste crime, which the Member touched on.

The Member asked a fair question. If something was flagged up in 2009, what is the story since 2009? I think that is an entirely reasonable question. That is why I have appointed Chris Mills, the former chief executive of the Welsh Environment Agency, and I have directed him to interrogate, in a fearless and robust way, what has happened in the waste side of the Environment Agency to identify what was known, what was not known and why was it not known. We will get to the bottom of all that, and we will tell the full story of all that. I have to point out to Lord Morrow that all that happened when there were three DUP Ministers in the space of four years.

Putting that aside, I agree with the Member in respect of enforcement. Subject to further advice, it is likely that I will appoint Chris Mills, not just to do the exercise on what happened on the waste side over the last period of time,

but to look at the planning side. There were issues around planning and planning enforcement in and around the relevant areas of land in the north-west, and if there is anything to be discovered in that regard, in a robust and fearless way, we will do so. Ultimately, though, actions taken against the landowners in the north-west and against the waste management facility in the north-west send out a message that organised crime needs to be on its watch for enforcement. It is of some note that those who ran that waste management facility closed their business down.

Mr Dallat: I have listened very carefully to the Minister's statement and welcome it. Does the Minister agree that, in the distant past, much of our natural and built heritage was systematically destroyed under the guise of job creation and tourism? Does PPS 2 mean that we will not have any more crazy proposals, such as turning Knock Golf Club into a building site?

Mr Attwood: In our experience and the experience of Europe, the reason why we needed the directives, be they on habitats, birds, water or anything else, was that although these were huge natural assets that we enjoyed, we were not doing enough to protect them. That is the wider story of the growing threat of climate change and global warming. There has to be a standard. That is what PPS 16 is about: it is about sustainable, high-quality development. I think that you can have sustainable, high-quality development that is fully respectful of the heritage, and any adverse impacts can be sufficiently mitigated. Indeed, some decisions have been made, but because of the very stringent environmental conditions laid down in planning permission, you will actually have better management of land. For example, in the Runkerry decision, there were 21 robust planning conditions. One of those dealt with the management of woodland on that site. As you will know, there is a small area of woodland in part of the Runkerry site. I have walked that site and have gone through that woodland, and it is falling in on itself because of inadequate management, so we said that there has to be a proper management plan for the woodland on that site.

I could give you multiple other examples of how planning conditions can, in the context of sustainable, high-quality development, protect our heritage. I hope that that is the message that people, including friends of Ms Lo, are hearing.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. How do you see PPS 2 sitting with PPS 16 that you referred to on tourism? Do you agree that there is a need to maximise our tourism potential at every opportunity as one way of growing our economy? I just wonder how those two policies will sit with each other.

Mr Attwood: PPS 2 and PPS 16 have been recently endorsed by the Executive, and I must acknowledge that Ministers have interrogated those two planning policy statements in some depth, and they have been changed because of that interrogation. The fact that Ministers, particularly the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and myself, as the Environment Minister, have signed off on them, suggests that both of us recognise that PPS 2 and PPS 16 are entirely consistent with the objective of the pathway through the planning process to have sustainable high-quality development on one hand and tourist numbers, jobs and increased spend on the other. Otherwise, we would not be signing off on those PPSs. So, the answer to your question is that if we do not have PPS 2 and PPS 16, we will put in jeopardy that which we value. By having PPS 2 and PPS 16, we can protect what we have, as we enhance what we have. That is the pathway forward in order to maximise the economic return and that is a pathway that has been endorsed by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, as well as by all Ministers.

Mr Allister: In light of last week's notified power grab on the Department, would it be right to conclude that policies 3, 4 and 6 in PPS 2 could be ignored, superseded and, essentially, abrogated in any process of economic zone in which the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) took upon itself the powers that it intends? Is that the actual situation?

Mr Attwood: I have never used the words "power grab" in respect of what happened last week. I think it is more eloquent and chilling to say bad politics, bad law and bad government. That is my view, because I think that that captures not only the fact that there is bad politics about the amendments that were passed last week with regard to taking to another part of government functions that it is not fit to fulfil. Such action represents bad government, bad law and bad politics, and that is why I use that phrase.

As I indicated to Mr Elliott, as I indicated last week and as I will confirm now, in my view, and I have got legal advice to this effect, in taking forward economic planning, be it what the FM

and DFM think they are going to get up to, what I have done or what the councils might do in the future, you cannot ride a coach and horses through European designations, European directives and European requirements. You may wish it otherwise; I do not, and they may. You cannot delete that requirement from our domestic law, and that is what they did. If, in making economic assessments, you delete the references and requirements under European law —

Mr Hamilton: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Attwood: Sorry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Attwood: If you make economic planning and ignore European designations, it follows that you ignore those elements — the various planning policies outlined in the planning policy statement — referred to by Mr Allister in his question.

I found it somewhat inconsistent, contradictory and mildly bizarre that, last Thursday, the Executive passed a planning policy statement that builds into our law and planning practice respect for designations, but, on Tuesday, deleted references to the same things in our primary legislation. Can Peter Robinson and Martin McGuinness explain to me why if it is good enough on a Thursday it is not good enough on a Tuesday?

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his statement. It is timely that he brings the policy on the protection of the environment at a time when diggers at the back of the Building are ripping up trees during nesting season, right outside the Green Party office.

In the statement on the policy, the Minister referred to giving assurances on European designations. Has he been given any advice on the impact of potential economic planning zones on areas that have domestic designations?

12.15 pm

Mr Attwood: First, I note what the Member said about the trees. Yesterday, I enquired into the matter because my office also overlooks the ongoing works. There are no tree-protection orders in respect of the trees that were removed. This Building is not in a conservation zone. Consequently, there are no restrictions on the removal of trees, but I note what the Member says. If I had thought that there was

some reason for me to go to the Assembly Commission, which is why I asked those questions yesterday morning, I would have done so. Two or three semi-mature trees have been removed. Let me put it this way: they were not removed with any delicacy. They certainly were not removed to be replanted elsewhere. That is how things transpired.

The Member's question is a good one. The legal advice that I got in respect of the proposed economic zones captures both domestic law under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and our European and international obligations. I need to double-check the answer to that particular question, and I will certainly do so.

Committee Business

Committee for Regional Development: Better Use of Public and Community Sector Funds for the Delivery of Transport Options

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into the better use of public and community sector funds for the delivery of transport options; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank all of the witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee during its evidence sessions and those who received us and gave us so much of their time on study visits to Dublin, Glasgow, Exeter, Cardiff and Arnhem. I thank our researcher, Hansard and, of course, our Committee team. I would also like to thank the Committee bursary student, Brian Mahon, for his work and wish him well with his studies and future career.

Cuirim fáilte roimh an deis an rún a chur roimh an Tionól inniu. I welcome the opportunity to move the motion that is before the House. I welcome it as the first opportunity to present to the House the Committee's assessment of the potential for integrated transport in the North of Ireland.

We can all cite examples about the visually apparent duplication of transport services across three Departments, namely, the Department of Education; the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS); and the Department for Regional Development (DRD), through the current public transport provider, Translink. On many occasions, we have seen buses from all three congregated on the same roads, travelling along the same routes at the same time.

Colleagues from rural constituencies will, undoubtedly, tell the House about 16-seater buses with, at the most, one or two people on them, travelling behind Translink buses with a similar number of people onboard.

All of that is for the bargain price of over £200 million from the public purse each year. To put it another way, if we go to a five-year mandate, £1 billion will have been spent on providing public transport in the North of Ireland. That does not include the capital for providing each of the fleets that are maintained in the public sector. That is just the cost of moving people from one point to another. I am sure that the House will agree that, given the tight fiscal situation that we face today, including the further cuts announced last week, the use of transportation facilities that pay for themselves without additional and unnecessary funding is essential.

Transport Scotland defined integrated transport as:

"A mechanism where departments of an organisation or various organisations jointly plan and deliver transport, sharing resources (vehicles/drivers/staff) and procurement to optimise their use to meet service demand, and enhance the delivery of transport to appropriate users."

During the inquiry, the Committee sought evidence of co-operation between Departments but found none. Instead, it was faced with a barrage of excuses to support the case for doing nothing — regulations do not allow for it; different contracts for different drivers; and some buses need one type of door, while others need a different one. Even the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) were cited as a reason. "Barriers to integration" became the buzz words during Committee evidence sessions. The only obvious evidence presented to the Committee was that each Department, each trust and each board just wanted to revert to their own individual silos and protect what they believed to be theirs. There was no desire, no willingness and no appetite for integration.

There were some exceptions to the experience that I outlined. As is often the case, volunteers in our communities wanted to see a change. Community transport associations were very vocal in wanting to extend their services, be it through Dial-a-Lift or Door-2-Door. They wanted to link their often excluded communities into the core network and provide a real alternative that complemented the existing services. However, their frustrations were also

evident, particularly with the proposed changes to the 10B operator licences, which would see many of their volunteer drivers unable to continue providing a key service in socially excluded communities.

The Committee for Regional Development is fully supportive of their calls to have that problem resolved urgently. Committee members have seen excellent examples of how similar licence arrangements operate in the Netherlands and Scotland, including the collection of fare-paying passengers along agreed routes. This is a regulatory matter that can be easily resolved. We recommend that the Department for Regional Development and the Department of the Environment liaise on the review of the 10B operating licence, with a view to expanding the potential for community transport delivery of scheduled, fare-paying routes and other public procurement exercises, such as the delivery of school meals. Efforts also need to be made to ensure that that important provision is utilised to its full effect.

Although the community transport associations stated their opposition to changes to the regulations governing their licences and offered solutions as to how it could be achieved, others put forward compliance with the legislation as an excuse to do nothing. The Committee, however, does not accept that. We are of the view that, if the legislation as it currently exists is preventing meaningful integration, it must be changed, and we have the ability to do so.

The Committee recommends, therefore, that the relevant Departments review their respective legislative and regulatory processes to ensure that vehicles and services can be used for a wider range of services than that for which they are currently deployed. That should include the ability to charge a fare or fee for use of the service. The Committee does not see why a school bus, for example, should drop off students and then be prohibited from collecting passengers rather than returning back to an empty depot.

In addition, the Committee believes that the Department, in conjunction with the Community Transport Association (CTA), should examine the potential for realignment of current services in preparation for the expansion of the range of services to be provided under the recommended 10B licence. The Committee is mindful that different community transport providers have different skill sets and that there is scope for integration within the sector. It is important, therefore, for the Department and the Community Transport Association to assess what capacity-building is required to operate an

enhanced service. This should not be so bureaucratic as to deter volunteers from providing their services, but it should be sufficient to ensure that users of the services are protected and that all statutory obligations, such as roadworthiness, are catered for.

One major weakness identified by the Committee was how much it costs to move a person from one place to another. The level of control over transport budgets varied significantly across and within those providing the service. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) and the Department of Education are very clear on what their budgets are, but that was less evident in DHSSPS and the trusts, where provision of transport was almost seen as incidental to the operation of hospitals and other clinics. When Members spoke to transport organisations such as the National Transport Authority in Dublin and the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, the message delivered was that transport can be truly integrated only when budgets are centralised. There was the potential to achieve that had the Department implemented the agency model identified during the transport reform process. However, that model is no longer available.

The Committee remains of the view that efforts should be made to integrate transport budgets. Accordingly, it recommends that the Minister for Regional Development commences formal negotiation with his Executive colleagues to identify the best model for the funding of transport across the entire sector. The Committee further recommends that the Budget review group and the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) undertake an urgent study on the centralisation of the transport budget to aid and inform the Minister and the Executive in their consideration of the matter.

The Committee is aware that the integration of transport provision has many complexities. That was made evident when representatives from the Committee attended a seminar on integrated transport organised by the Passenger Transport Executive Group in London. The seminar provided the Committee with a great many insights into the potential, and pitfalls, of integrated transport. Case studies of pilot projects provided many solutions to the complex problems and, in some cases, raised even more. However, it was evident that the pilot projects were a very effective vehicle for testing the concept of integration and were necessary to bring about successful change. We will hear from the Minister later, no doubt, about the two pilot projects that are at different

stages of being tested and evaluated: the one in my constituency is Easilink in Fermanagh, which provides services to Altnagelvin hospital; and the other is in Dungannon. The Committee has concerns about the latter. The pilot does not include the integration of the health fleet because, as officials from the Department indicated, it does not have a large enough presence in the area. It strikes me as strange that you would pilot an integration project in an area where the fleet cannot be integrated. Effectively, the pilot is looking at the integration of the school and core networks, which happens daily during the school year.

We hear anecdotal evidence of the refusal to look at integrating special needs customers and those with disabilities because of their particular circumstances and because of bus design. Although we fully appreciate the specific care needs that special needs children and those with a disability have, we cannot accept that those individuals can never be integrated into our transport provision.

12.30 pm

The Committee saw how the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport worked with local special educational needs (SEN) and health providers to ensure that children, many of whom shared the same classrooms, could travel to school with friends on specially designed buses. We heard how SEN schools asked the partnership to develop training schemes that would provide training on the use of public transport to children as preparation for when they left the school. We heard feedback from those pupils that stated that they felt they were no longer socially excluded and that the stigma of having separate buses was removed, so there were very positive personal and non-monetary benefits. It is therefore important that we do not lose this potential during the pilot project. With that in mind, the Committee recommends that the pilot project should look at the potential for full integration of those fleets in the test area, including that of the health fleets. The pilot scheme should also test whether there is a need for a redesign of specific elements of the fleet to allow for a better integration of able and less-able customers.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

I will now address the issue of the imbalance between the departmental budget allocation for roads against that of public transport. As we have reported, a number of organisations considered the budget allocation to be in contradiction of the Programme for Government

objective on sustainable transport and could not see how the necessary modal shift could be made from cars to public transport, something that would also be greatly aided if an effective integrated transport system was in place. At the commencement of the inquiry, there were no professionally qualified transport planners employed in the public transport sector. The Committee notes that the Department has now seconded one on a short- to medium-term contract: indeed, the individual subsequently seconded to the Department was one of the first witnesses to give evidence to the Committee.

The Committee believes that there needs to be a collaborative approach to the planning and funding of transport. The Committee further believes that, in order to achieve a substantial degree of modal shift, the end-user needs to be consulted in order that the “when, where and how” of people wishing to travel can be understood. We recommend, therefore, that the Minister undertake a major travel-proofing, mapping and identification of appropriate transport options of customer transport needs in the North of Ireland as soon as is practicable. In addition, we would ask that departmental budgets are re-examined to identify coverage for the secondment of additional professionally qualified transport planners to undertake this exercise.

The Committee has made other recommendations that will no doubt be covered during the course of this debate. As Deputy Chair, I welcome and look forward to the comments that Members will make today and hope that they can support the motion. I support the report and the motion.

Mr Easton: DRD made a presentation to the Committee on the pilot integration scheme in Dungannon on 15 May 2013, during which departmental representatives spoke of barriers to the delivery of the pilot scheme such as different drivers, accessibility of vehicles and insurance requirements, public service vehicle (PSV) licence requirements for bus drivers and collecting the general public for hire and reward. A major hurdle to integration is those who hold the budgets. A great deal of reference has been made to the budgets during the oral evidence sessions and to the fact that Northern Ireland cannot be compared to local government provision in the remainder of the UK. In addition, transport in England, Wales and Scotland has been deregulated for a number of years.

A major barrier to integration is the attitude of departmental officials in the three main

Departments with transport responsibilities, who appear to be embedded in the respective departmental silos and are actively reluctant to accept suggestions for change. Examples of this include a new approach for regional transportation that will shape transport investment from 2015. It is isolated and insular to DRD alone and does not incorporate transport in other Executive Departments.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office report of June 2005, titled 'Education and Health and Social Services Transport', concluded:

"there is scope for the development of a greater consensus on how the transport assets available within both sectors might be more effectively coordinated to improve operational efficiency and enhance the services provided to customers."

DHSSPS officials told the Committee that their response was to point out the constraints on doing anything in the Audit Office. Department of Education officials, in oral evidence and follow-up correspondence, referred to a downtime survey that indicated that there was little scope for the sharing of vehicles. That is despite the survey looking only at weekdays and during school terms. Other excuses provided included TUPE, timetabling, drivers' contracts and child protection, even though the majority of schoolchildren's travel on normal Translink services takes place during the school day, the evening and at the weekend. The Committee is content that there are no real barriers to integration that would prevent progress along that path.

Through the careful targeting of its study visits, the Committee has been able to see examples of how the perceived barriers have been overcome, such as the designs for a front-loaded bus that caters for able and less able passengers, the leasing of buses to community transport organisations and the scheduling and collection of tariff-paying passengers in remote rural areas by voluntary drivers. The Committee also believes that a major attitude change is required at senior level right across the Departments, trusts and boards with responsibility for transport. That should commence immediately.

The new approach to regional transportation was launched in March 2012 and set three high-level aims covering the economy, society and the environment for the future development of transport. Those are driven by the Executive's Programme for Government and are supported by 12 strategic transport objectives. The new approach included a new

policy prioritisation framework to assess the policy fit of what to do and to help reach a better decision on transportation investment by identifying the schemes that will best achieve the set out strategic objectives. The Department has been developing that framework in liaison with other Departments, including the Department of Health and the Department of Education. The Department will continue to work with key stakeholders in the development of the framework to ensure that the desired policy outcomes of the Executive are achieved.

Mr Dallat: The study of public transport and its development is a fascinating subject that knows no limits or bounds. It occupies the time of teachers and pupils as well as enthusiasts across the country as they learn of the stagecoach and especially the mail coach, which could deliver letters to Dublin faster 150 years ago. There is keen interest in the navvies who built the canals and those who first introduced steam engines on to our roads, who had to carry a red flag to warn of the danger. Everyone wants to know about the era of the steam trains: Stephenson's Rocket, the Flying Scotsman and our own history of Irish railways, which brought freedom of travel to people on a scale unimaginable.

Today, there is no such excitement about public transport and its development. Let us hope that this inquiry will bring a new stimulus and perhaps a renaissance that will get people excited again about the way we travel. The Committee certainly did not restrict its travel during the inquiry to discover what could be done to develop an integrated form of transport that would address the needs of people rather than the whims of those who currently run what can only be described as a system that is a little bit disjointed. It is costly to run and fails to meet the needs of many of the people who rely on public transport.

Much of what is recommended in the report should have happened, and it has happened in some of the places that the Committee members visited. The pilot study currently taking place in the Dungannon and Cookstown area will hopefully chart the way forward for an integrated public transport system that is fit for purpose and less wasteful in the way in which it operates. As was indicated by the Deputy Chairman, to make that happen new legislation will be necessary, as it was all those years ago when Stephenson's Rocket made its first journey from Stockton to Darlington, as it was when the red flag Act was legislated for when the first steam engines began speeding through the towns and villages at the breakneck speed

of 4 mph, and as it has been for every new development in public transport. Today, with new technology, there is no reason why we cannot make better use of that technology to tailor public transport needs to the individual. Indeed, we saw good examples of that in Dublin and Glasgow, where they make use of the call centre model.

We need a commitment from those who hold the reins of power over a disjointed public transport system that falls far short of what we could have if only there was the creative wisdom and enthusiasm of our predecessors: the men and women who built the canals and the railways, pioneered the stagecoaches and brought travel within the reach of many people who had not travelled outside their own village before. Today, the scene is different, but the issues are similar. Many older people have free travel, but what use is that if the transport system is not tailored to their needs? That is one of the questions that this inquiry addresses, but, again, it can happen only if the Executive have the commitment and the determination to make it happen.

The report refers to the needs of less able customers. Although I have mentioned this last, it should be first in the list of priorities. Public transport has made strides to accommodate people with disabilities, but we fall far short of what is possible. In Glasgow, for example, the same buses can accommodate able-bodied people alongside those who use a wheelchair. That is real progress and is one of the fingerposts towards a fully integrated public transport system.

There has been a lot of speculation around this place about the future of some Ministers: I hope that the current Minister for Regional Development remains in his post. He has shown a lot of interest in this subject, and I believe that he is the person who will deliver.

Mr Hussey: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. I apologise to the Deputy Chairman for not being here for the start of his speech. Unfortunately, I was at another event in the other House.

Unlike the previous Member who spoke, I do not remember the red flags or the steam engines. I hardly remember the trains in Omagh before they were taken away. However, I am delighted with the support that he gave to our Minister, who, I am sure, will feel confident in his position until the next election. *[Interruption.]* I did not see the whites of his eyes; I am looking at the back of his head.

The title of the report is fairly self-explanatory. It is about the better integration of services, which, in turn, could lead to a better passenger experience and, ultimately, to greater efficiencies and savings. That is something that the Committee, the Assembly and, no doubt, the Minister would agree on.

Criticism of Executive Departments working with a silo mentality is nothing new. Sometimes, Departments claim that they have no choice because of their budgetary arrangements, but that is not an excuse. If two Departments are trying to do the same thing, parallel to each other, that is not the best use of public money. That is a point that was also found during the Committee's work on the inquiry.

One of the first debates that I brought to the Assembly was a call on the Education Minister to carry out a root-and-branch review of home-to-school transport. That followed a number of deeply disappointing failures by the Department in the west Tyrone area, particularly the Strabane area. Unsurprisingly, Minister O'Dowd does not appear to have given any attention to the problems raised in that motion. Therefore, is it really surprising that the same old problems are still occurring? That is an example of a Minister failing to act even after being mandated to do so by the Assembly.

Another point raised in that motion was the collaboration between the education and library boards and Translink. Both have their responsibilities, with Translink taking the lead role in the service. Indeed, the arrangement works quite well. However, there is still duplication, with buses running almost identical routes, often below capacity, and some households still being missed.

Of course, it is not just the education and library board buses and Translink that could co-operate on home-to-school transport but all types of transport, whether it is community buses or even taxis, on which a heavy reliance is still placed in a number of circumstances, especially in rural areas such as west Tyrone. That is a perfect example of an area where greater collaboration between Departments would be beneficial.

12.45 pm

Although education would be the obvious area for collaboration, our health service also relies significantly on bus transport. Local community buses play an absolutely vital role in transporting patients, especially the elderly, where other means of transport are often not

available. A prime example of that is in the Omagh to Enniskillen area where people from Omagh are attempting to get to the new South West Acute Hospital.

The Minister and his Department will shortly implement a pilot in the Dungannon area, and that is to be welcomed. I hope that it tests all the opportunities for better integration. That pilot is the opportunity for DRD to work with the local stakeholders, the SELB, the Health Department and trusts, as well as those bodies with responsibilities within the Department. However, I urge them to ensure not only that all organisations are properly consulted on an ongoing basis during the pilot but that the Department's expectations of them are made clear to them. The pilot will not deliver maximum benefit unless all bodies take part with equal esteem for it. I, therefore, ask the Minister to detail what steps his Department will take to ensure that it gets the necessary buy-in to make it applicable. I hope that the exercise will ultimately reveal enough opportunities for a joined-up approach to justify it being rolled out across the Province.

I am in no doubt that some aspects of our system, such as home-to-school transport, are already integrated to a significant degree, which is welcome, but the fact that one end of it is working does not excuse the changes that are needed at the other. The report has highlighted areas where there may still be scope for further integration. No doubt, the Minister and his officials will have read those with interest, and I agree that some are more relevant than others. I wish the Minister well in his efforts to deliver a better, more integrated bus transport system, and I am delighted that the SDLP has secured your place in the Assembly until the end of this period. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Dickson: I too fully support the recommendations in the report and ask the Minister, who will obviously be here for a very long time, to commit to implementing those forthwith, now that he has the time.

The report confirms the need for a more integrated transport network to better serve all the people of Northern Ireland. As others have said, the report highlights a disjoint in transport planning that results in duplication and overlapping of transport expenditure by all other Departments. That disjoint means that the Assembly has an enormous bill for transport without any Department taking consideration of effective and efficient delivery.

I ask the Minister to get together with the Minister of Health, whoever he may be, and the

Minister of Education — I think we probably know that he will be here for some time — to introduce effective transport planning to ensure that there is a more efficient transport system that will provide an effective service to meet the needs of people across Northern Ireland. By centralising the transport planning function and with better integrated use of budgets, we genuinely have the opportunity to deliver a more person-centred transport system that will be more efficient, but we need to know where, why, when and how people travel. By planning transport to meet the needs of the public, we can create that modal shift. We can develop a public transport system using a mix of service providers, and we can reduce expenditure by making the best use of resources and assets.

If we had the capacity for the Department of Education's yellow buses to bring rural dwellers into larger towns with schoolchildren or for community transport to support access to hospital appointments, either through a direct connection to the hospital or by linking people to the main public transport network, we would have an integrated public transport system that was working for Northern Ireland. Although I welcome the pilot that is ongoing at the moment, my belief is that it is not sufficiently ambitious and more work needs to be done in order to develop it.

In order to progress an integrated transport system, the report highlights the need for clarity and confirmation on bus licensing. As a matter of urgency, I ask the Minister to confirm the role and future delivery of services by community transport providers and to ensure, along with the Minister of the Environment, that new bus licensing will not exclude or prevent the community and voluntary sectors from having an active and much-needed role in an integrated system.

The ongoing saga of bus licensing is creating a barrier to future transport planning. Regional Development Committee and the voluntary sector want to do more but are prevented from doing so because of licensing and departmental procedural arrangements. Any new licensing arrangements must allow the transport resources in the community and voluntary sectors and in health and education to be brought into the supply chain to allow a better mix of vehicles and services.

Finally, the silo mentality demonstrated by officials throughout the inquiry has to be dealt with. The Programme for Government aimed to reduce such silo approaches, but, to date, the Minister and his colleagues in Health and Education have failed to embrace the

opportunity to work together to make a better transport system. The Health Department is good at delivering health, and the Department of Education is good at delivering education. Neither are transport suppliers, yet both have enormous expenditure on transport. We need to stop and change that.

The report recommends a smarter way of delivering transport for Northern Ireland that enables collaborative working that will see justifiable savings for this Assembly. I urge the Minister to take forward the recommendations with immediate effect.

Mr I McCrea: I support the motion and the report commissioned by the Committee. If he has not already taken the opportunity to do so, I hope that the Minister will do some midnight reading and go through the report which, no doubt, will keep him up for quite a while.

Community transport was one of the key aspects of the Committee's evidence sessions. The Deputy Chairperson and others have mentioned the 10B licences, and there is a lot of concern about the way in which changes that have been made by the Department of the Environment to those licences will have an impact on the ability of community transport providers to continue to exist.

I know that, in dealing with community transport providers, the Minister has done his best to make the Community Transport Association's systems more efficient. However, it is important that, in delivering services — this was part of the inquiry — we integrate them into wider transport provision.

Much has been said about the mid-Ulster pilot. Although it is called a mid-Ulster pilot, it takes in only a very small part of the constituency. Nonetheless, it has an impact on part of my constituency, and I welcome that. As other Members said, it is a pilot, and there is room for improvement. I suppose that it has to start somewhere, and we have to see how it resolves the integration of services. I hope that we will see an outcome of that in the not-too-distant future.

The constituency that I represent is two thirds rural. One of the issues that I hear about day and daily is access to public transport. I have had conversations with transport providers that have tried to fill that gap, but getting people to the nearest bus stop is not part of their remit. There are difficulties for people who live some distance away from the closest bus stop and cannot get to the nearest town to do their shopping or travel on to hospital appointments

and things like that. Those issues are important.

Mr Dallat, when he got to the present day, referred to the free travel that the Department provides for our senior citizens.

In that context, if people cannot access public transport without getting into their car and driving to their closest bus station, it defeats the purpose. Living in a rural area, the difficulties that arise from that are evident.

Doing nothing is not an option, as the Minister will recognise. Other Departments deliver similar services and, as suggested even during evidence to the Committee, are able to do so more cheaply. A common theme in the Committee evidence sessions was that a lot more could be done to try to deliver the integration of services a lot more efficiently and in the best interests of the people whom we represent.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ceapaim go ndearna an Coiste Forbartha Réigiúnaí píosa iontach oibre ar an ábhar seo. Agus cosúil le daoine eile, ba mhaith liom labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin agus na tuarascála fosta. I am very happy to speak in favour of the motion and recognise the work of the Committee in delivering this report.

The Regional Development Committee's report provides a progressive and productive set of recommendations, and I ask Minister Kennedy to implement all of them as soon as possible. The provision of transport here costs the public purse over £200 million per annum, and the Minister has the opportunity to take forward progressive actions to ensure that transport in the North will be fit for purpose, meet the needs of the people, integrate the mix of service providers and make the best use of resources bought and paid for by the Assembly.

John Dallat, in a contribution in the style of John Betjeman, rightly remarked on the field trips taken by the Committee. The value of those field trips is reflected in the report, in that they looked at best practice in Dublin, Scotland and Holland.

The Committee wants the Minister to adopt the example set by Transport Scotland in 2009, which introduced a mechanism whereby departments of an organisation or various organisations jointly plan and deliver transport and share resources, vehicles, drivers, staff and procurement to optimise their use to meet the service demand and enhance the delivery of transport to appropriate users.

It is vital that Minister Kennedy develops an action plan in partnership with the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Edwin Poots, and the Education Minister, John O'Dowd, to centralise transport resources, including budgets, and plan for a more integrated transport system.

Reference was made to the two trial schemes — the two pilot projects — and there were some concerns in the Committee about the way in which they were delivered, particularly the uptake of and publicity for the Enniskillen/Derry pilot, and the time frame and delivery of the Dungannon pilot, given that it has been held up as a model of best practice for the roll-out of the project elsewhere.

There is an opportunity to expand the current transport planning function in DRD, thereby removing private vehicles from our roads. By adopting an accessible transport planning model, DRD can take forward centralised functions that will meet the needs of health, education and public transport by mapping and identifying appropriate transport functions for people. Combined with a centralised call centre approach, integrated ticketing across a mix of vehicle suppliers and the tracking of vehicles, that will deliver a properly managed transport network, taking and making the best use of resources and money.

By working together, all three Departments have the ability to create an inclusive integrated transport solution that will provide better access to services for the public.

There is a need to include the community transport sector. I take this opportunity to praise the work of the CTA and other community transport providers as part of the transport mix. Throughout the inquiry, the Committee heard how the community transport sector wants to play a more effective role to help to deliver solutions to older people, people with disabilities and people who live in rural areas and/or in isolation. However, there are a number of barriers to prevent this Assembly from making best use of these suppliers. Bus operator licences, as others have mentioned, are still not sorted, even though the review started in March 2010, and current procurement systems exclude non-profit community transport suppliers from being able to deliver services.

1.00 pm

It is vital that the Ministers for Regional Development and the Environment confirm the licensing agreements to allow our much-respected community and voluntary sector to

deliver a wider remit and enhance services as we move transport forward. No one expects our recommendations to be fulfilled overnight. However, the Committee has watched in horror as officials have ignored requests from the Audit Office to come together. The silo mentality needs to stop. The Assembly can no longer afford to have the Departments spending millions duplicating services.

I am proud of the report presented by the Committee and encourage the Minister to take forward the recommendations quickly, with actual results being realised before the end of this Assembly period.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I rise to make a few comments in relation to this report as Chair of the Education Committee. This is not the first time that I have stood here on behalf of the Education Committee to discuss issues in relation to public transport. Home-to-school transport is a key example that we need to clearly define and clearly understand, as it provided a lifeline in many isolated communities, but carries with it a substantial cost of somewhere in the region of £70 million per year. About half of this money goes to Translink, and I believe that the Regional Development Committee will be pursuing the issue Translink's profits in the coming days.

About £23 million, based on 2010-11 figures for the home-to-school transport budget, goes to keep the education and library boards' fleet on the road, and three quarters of that money goes to cover staff costs. To be clear, it appears that these costs are paid whether the bus is on the road or not, and I think that that is an issue that needs to be addressed.

The education and library board bus fleet could therefore be thought of as a sunk cost. Greater use of these buses could have a relatively small marginal cost, with untold benefits for taxpayers throughout the rest of Northern Ireland.

A better, smarter use of publicly owned vehicles is obviously a good idea, and indeed I understand that following the commencement of this inquiry, the Departments of Education and Health were prompted to undertake the pilot that has been referred to in Dungannon. My colleague from Magherafelt Mr McCrea referred to it. Also, Mr Easton referred to the hurdles that have appeared in relation to this particular pilot and all the problems that seem to have emanated from it.

What is the problem, and what is to be done? The report recommends a review of the

legislation to ensure that vehicles and services can be used for a wider range, and the report also recommends an Executive-wide approach to the funding of transport across the whole public sector, including education. The Committee for Education is very happy to endorse these sensible and, I believe, achievable recommendations.

The Committee hopes that it will soon see the Department of Education's PEDU action plan for school transport. We have been waiting for this longer than you would wait for a bus. I throw out the challenge to all the people in the House this morning — this afternoon, now — who are singing the praises of public transport: how many actually use public transport to come to this House? Well, it was not because I was speaking on this today, but I used the train to come here, as I do regularly. As I have said to the Minister in the past, the trains are good but the bus service is less than good. The connectivity between Central Station and this House is something that needs to be looked at.

However, moving on from that, I was worried when the Member for East Londonderry stood up. He was going to have us all back on steam trains and back on the canal. Maybe that is a reflection of the politics of the party that he belongs to and the era that it comes from.

We are still waiting, after 18 months, for the PEDU action plan. What did it say? The PEDU action plan is a very detailed analysis. We don't need any more figures or facts, but in 2010-11, £75 million was spent transporting just under 90,000 Northern Ireland pupils from home to school and back. At a time when we are told that pupil numbers are falling, that represents an increase in spend of 17.3% compared with 2004-05. The net result was that the cost per pupil increased by 28% over the past five years. In addition, the increase in costs has not been uniform across the five education and library boards. The cost per pupil in the South Eastern Education and Library Board rose by 14.3%, while in the Belfast Board the unit cost increased — let Members hear this — by 58.7%. Something is going wrong, and somebody, somewhere is benefiting as a result of the process.

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

Mr Storey: Much more could be said about the PEDU report. I call on the Minister to use his best endeavours to ensure that the Minister of Education plays his active part in delivering a proper, well-funded and fit-for-purpose transport system —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — in our schools.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I speak in favour of the motion. As the Members who spoke previously said, £200 million is spent each year on transport. Apart from the two pilot studies that have been referred to, there has been very little attempt to join up the various providers. Like the Members who have spoken, I have seen situations in which vehicles from different providers collect people at the same time and travel on the same routes.

Since joining the Committee for Regional Development last September, I have sat through meetings in which compelling evidence has been presented for a shared transport solution. However, I have also heard from providers who are more focused on the reasons that that cannot happen. Indeed, the term "silo" was often used to describe that failure or unwillingness to join up transport provision. That has been very apparent in some of the evidence sessions and has flagged the need for a serious attitudinal shift at a more strategic level.

Along with other Committee members, I had the opportunity to take part in one of the fact-finding trips, which was to Dublin and Glasgow. In Dublin, we were briefed by representatives from the National Transport Authority. We learned about its local integrated transport services pilot scheme, which used successful case studies from Louth, Meath, Sligo and Leitrim to illuminate the strategy's objectives. We heard about different opportunities for integration such as the collect-and-connect services, whereby passengers can access local services that bring them to an interchange point that connects with the scheduled services; hospital-feeder services; co-ordinated journey planning; and integrated ticketing. All of that provides valuable lessons for an integrated transport solution in this part of the island.

The second leg of the fact-finding visit was to Glasgow. We visited the headquarters of the Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT), which is the largest of seven regional transport partnerships in Scotland. It covers a wide, rural geographical area that bears many similarities to the North in topography and demography, albeit that it has a larger population. The partnership is funded by the local authorities and central government and has a remit for planning and co-ordination for the 12 member councils in its area.

In evidence sessions in Parliament Buildings, we heard that there are barriers to sharing transport among certain providers, particularly on issues such as child protection and the challenges connected with catering for people of various levels of ability on the same vehicles. However, when Committee members were briefed on the operation of the SPT's Flexibus service and had the opportunity to experience it at first hand, that removed any remaining doubt that an integrated transport solution cannot be found. In fact, the template is already there.

On the subject of catering for people of different abilities, the SPT officials made the point that, rather than segregating and effectively labelling people, their buses are designed to cater for all abilities. Therefore, the child who is a wheelchair user can be collected on the same basis as his or her able-bodied peers. The officials further pointed out that those buses have minimal downtime. Once the school runs are completed in the morning, the Flexibus is used for a variety of purposes during the day; for example, as a local bus service. That is what provoked the quote that is included in the Committee report. The deputy chief executive said to us:

"You just have to sweat the bus a wee bit more!"

All that is anchored through a call centre, which Members also had an opportunity to visit and learn about.

The evidence that I have heard to date overwhelmingly supports the view that a silo mentality exists among our transport providers, which costs millions of pounds every year. A shared transport solution can be found, but it will require a serious attitudinal shift.

Mrs D Kelly: When it gets to this stage in a debate, it is difficult to know what new information I can add or what questions I can ask the Minister, who, of course, has my full endorsement as well as my party colleague's.

I put on record my thanks to the Committee staff, the Research and Information Service staff and the Committee Clerk for putting the report together and assisting us with our inquiry. It is important Committee work that can bring something new to the table to address concerns across the broader community and among stakeholders.

Later today, there will be a debate on how the next mandate should decide its Programme for Government in advance of its Budget. That is

to be welcomed. If we come to the debate with a mature, grown-up attitude, there is some hope that, in trying to work in the best interests of all our people, we will recognise the importance of transport to all our citizens. The historical underfunding of public sector transport, in particular, ought to be addressed.

As Members said, real savings can be made through an interdepartmental and integrated transport system in which the Education Department and the Health Department do not stand alone, with the public sector being out on a limb. I fully endorse the report's recommendations and their outworkings. The Audit Office report, 'Education and Health and Social Services Transport', made its conclusions some eight years ago, and they have not yet been acted on. I hope that we do not have to wait as long because, financially, we cannot afford to do that.

When evidence was being taken from various stakeholders, I discovered a surprising fact, which is the lack of professionally qualified transport planners in the Department. I will be interested to hear how the Minister hopes to address that matter in the short term.

Mr Storey talked about public sector and school transport. In Committee, I raised the point that in rural communities — certainly in the area that I live — there would be no public transport, by and large, if the schools were off. People have to walk at least half a mile to the nearest bus stop, which is unacceptable in the 21st century.

The needs of disabled users, particularly people with visual impairment, is also an area of concern.

One recommendation states that integrated ticketing systems should be extended beyond Belfast and Dungannon. There is also the issue of zoning.

If we are trying to get a change in culture and a different type of transport, there are short-, medium- and long-term recommendations in the report. I will be interested in how the Minister sets out an action plan to address those recommendations.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to respond to the debate on the Committee for Regional Development's report on the better use of public and community transport funding. The contributions have been very good.

The concept of local public transport planning and the integration of services was first proposed by my Department as part of a consultation on public transport reform in 2009-2010, so it is not a new issue. The report that we are looking at today makes a contribution to that. It will also provide a useful input to the work that my Department is already co-ordinating with other Departments; we are looking towards the pilot scheme, particularly that in the Dungannon area. Committee members and other Assembly Members are well aware of that work. I will not be tempted to speculate on my tenure in this post, save to say that I always recall Harold Wilson's maxim that a week is a long time in politics; it would be very wise for all Members to reflect on that.

1.15 pm

The pilot scheme involves my Department working with other organisations that either fund or deliver public transport services to assess and test the opportunities for better integration of services and the greater efficiencies that may be achieved. In doing so, it is hoped that we can improve the passenger experience by providing improved travel options. Preparatory work for the Dungannon pilot scheme is under way, and it will begin in earnest in September.

There is no shortage of organisations involved in the scheme: the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety; the Health and Social Care Board; the Southern Health and Social Care Trust; the Department of Education; the Southern Education and Library Board; the Department of the Environment; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development; the rural community transport partnership in the area; the Federation of Passenger Transport, representing the public transport industry, including private operators; and, importantly, Translink. There is a wide-ranging and full list of groups and key stakeholders involved. In addition, as part of the preparatory work for the implementation of the pilot later this year, officials have been consulting with a wide range of stakeholders, including Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council and Cookstown District Council, the Rural Community Network and the Consumer Council, which will take forward some work on behalf of the Department to identify transport-user requirements in the pilot area.

It is early days in the preparation for the pilot. However, from the analysis of the network that has been carried out so far, it is clear that there are opportunities for more integration between Translink and the Southern Education and

Library Board on school services. We want to trial these opportunities fully during the pilot. Another area that we are keen to trial is improved integration of community transport and school transport services on some minor roads in the area. That would enable us to test the viability of combining school transport and community transport in very rural areas to improve accessibility and make them both more financially sustainable for the long term.

Of course, we already have a considerable degree of integration in public and school transport, with Translink transporting nearly 60% of pupils who are entitled to home-to-school transport. It is rather disappointing that the Committee's conclusions did not acknowledge that as an example of good practice in service integration, because it provides us with a very good foundation on which to build. I say, in the correct spirit in which it is intended, that there is a lesson here that, to have your voice heard clearly in critique, you also have to be fair with positive comment. The existing integration also has the major advantage of helping to safeguard scheduled public transport services in rural areas, where it would otherwise be tough to justify fully the costs involved in providing services for public transport users, many of whom depend on public transport and do not have access to other forms of transport.

As has been raised in the debate, the pilot also plans to test the scope for better integration of the transport for children and adults with special needs, and that will involve the Southern Education and Library Board and the Southern Health Trust.

Improvements in passenger information are also being trialled, both through improved electronic information and targeted paper-based information about specific services. The focus of that work will be on how best to provide the fullest information to passengers and potential passengers about how to reach destinations that attract large numbers of users, such as the South Tyrone Hospital in Dungannon, Craigavon Area Hospital and the South West College in Dungannon. The aim will be to help more people to have easily available information about the public transport services in the area, including the interconnecting transport services that are often necessary for people who live in the more rural locations.

Joined-up transport is not only about tailoring public transport to services; it is about ensuring that future locations for service are accessible to existing transport. It is planned to introduce

initial improvements on the ground as early as the autumn. Those changes are likely to be in school transport provision, and, thereafter, further improvements will be introduced on a phased basis as solutions are developed. The pilot will run for about one year during which time the new arrangements will be evaluated.

Even at this early stage, it is expected that the changes will be sufficiently beneficial for the organisations involved to consider implementing them in other areas. That will require a delivery model to be developed, through which the very detailed work that is required to implement and sustain such improvements on a wider scale can be undertaken. A business case will be needed and will require expert transport planning input. That will assess the cost and benefits of wider roll-out, including the organisational and implementation arrangements that are necessary. The development of such an appraisal will need to be undertaken jointly with other Departments, and the necessary cross-government project management arrangements are already in place to facilitate that. At key points along the way, I will want to involve my Executive colleagues in all of this, and there may also be a need for some legislative change to be taken forward by the Department of the Environment.

As the Assembly will understand from reading the Committee's report, there are no ready-made solutions that we can simply lift from other jurisdictions. Many different models have been tried with varying degrees of success, and my Department has taken those on board. However, as I indicated, our public transport and school transport systems are already integrated to a significant degree. I have heard the harsh criticisms of the silo mentality, and I am interested in doing something about that.

For the first time, we have the advantage of having all the key players committed to and involved in helping to design the pilot arrangements, and that collaborative approach is proving very helpful in identifying potential opportunities to do things better. Implementing the pilot will require a significant ongoing effort from all the organisations involved, and designing arrangements that are suitable for delivery on a wider scale will also require considerable effort. The Dungannon pilot provides an important catalyst and an opportunity to design arrangements for the future that are user-focused and as efficient as possible. I am glad that the Committee's report is broadly supportive of my Department's direction of travel, and the Department will respond more fully to the recommendations in

the coming months as the pilot progresses through its various stages. You did not indicate how long I have, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Fifteen minutes.

Mr Kennedy: Thank you very much indeed.

I will deal with some of the issues raised by Members. The Deputy Chairman of the Committee said that he felt that there was no great willingness for integration. That is not the sense that I have. He raised a couple of queries about the transport agency. It was never intended to centralise departmental budgets through the DRD transport agency.

The agency is intended to deliver the new transport authority functions, including contracts with Translink. Of course, these are now the responsibility of Transport NI.

On the integration of health trusts with other providers, the pilot will explore the potential for the integration of transport services for children and adults with special needs. Mr Lynch and Mrs Kelly mentioned the number of officials and experts involved. One full-time planner is employed, and an additional planner will shortly be recruited.

Cathal Ó hOisín and Seán Lynch referred to the Altnagelvin to Enniskillen pilot. That is in operation and due to be evaluated later this year. At this stage, the uptake has not been as high as expected, but we continue to review it.

Mr McCrea asked about the criteria for accessibility to mainstream public transport. It is hoped to test the concept of a collect-and-connect service in the pilot, involving community transport that will take passengers to join the main Translink service. This, as he knows, already happens in some areas. We will have to look at the implications of the licensing review for changes to the 10B licences with DOE, but that should not impact on the ability to deliver the pilot.

My colleague Ross Hussey referred to integrating SELB and Translink delivery, and that will be looked at as part of the pilot process.

Generally, from Members' contributions, I gained an understanding of their frustration at the perceived silo mentality and their perception of budgets, but we must not underestimate the challenge of trying to improve the situation. That is not to say, of course, that we are not

determined to deliver and absolutely committed to delivering. I am committed to delivering a cost-effective and comprehensive public transport network that will increasingly become a real alternative to the private car and provide real choice.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister and Members for their positive comments during the debate, some of which I will return to in due course. What I heard encourages me, and I am even more convinced about the merits of an integrated transport system. At a time of economic uncertainty and high fuel prices, I firmly believe that integrated public transport is more important and sensible than ever. From an economic point of view, we need it to link people to jobs and services and help our villages, towns and cities to improve. We need to make better use of our public transport budgets. We must re-prioritise the existing sources of transport funding to enable the targeting of resources more directly on integrated public transport projects that deliver clear economic and social benefits.

I will refer to a number of the Members who spoke in the debate. Alex Easton highlighted the need to centralise budgets, and he and many others mentioned the silo mentality. He raised the important point that the regional transport strategy does not reference fleets in other Departments. It is difficult to know how important integrated transport is when the main transport strategy does not even refer to it.

1.30 pm

John Dallat was very much in the past on modes of transport; I just realised why he drives a Morris Minor. He is not in the Chamber, but he also talked about the need for greater stimulus for better integrated public transport that is fit for purpose today and tailored to the needs of users.

Ross Hussey, who never misses a chance to mention west Tyrone, stressed the need to exploit the potential of the pilot project and the need for all key stakeholders to be encouraged to participate. Stewart Dickson highlighted the design of our transport system and called on the Regional Development Minister to meet the Health Minister and the Education Minister to address fragmentation. He also called on the Minister of the Environment to sort out the community transport licensing issue, which is important.

My colleague Cathal Ó hOisín said that the recommendations were progressive and called on the Minister to put together an action plan that includes the centralisation of budgets. He also, quite rightly, spoke of the value and importance of the Community Transport Association. The Chair of the Education Committee, Mervyn Storey, referred to the cost of the education fleet and endorsed the sensible and achievable recommendations. We welcome the support of colleagues on the Education Committee.

Declan McAleer spoke of the compelling evidence for integrated systems and called for an attitudinal shift at senior level. Dolores Kelly endorsed the report and suggested that there might be mature debate on budgets and greater interdepartmental co-operation to bring about integrated transport systems, including ticketing.

I reiterate that the Committee fully appreciates the complexities of transport integration and that getting there is not going to be a quick process. However, the real examples of efficiency that are being achieved through, for example, fleet reduction and fuel procurement provide the Committee with encouragement that significant efficiencies can be achieved in the North of Ireland and that a user-ended service, with wider and more complete coverage, is possible. The Committee believes that the deputy chief executive of Strathclyde Partnership for Transport hit the nail on the head when he was asked how his organisation had been successful in its integration efforts. After a little thought — and this little statement was mentioned by my colleague Declan McAleer — he said, "You just have to sweat the bus a wee bit more." Sometimes, I wonder what he meant by that.

The Committee believes that this is achievable through collaborative working by the public and community sectors, but only if it gets the buy-in at the top: at the Executive. We need someone to champion this and to take us out of the silos that most Members mentioned as a barrier. We need someone who will provide the catalyst for change. The Committee for Regional Development believes that it is time to start that movement towards change, and I ask the House to support us in that belief.

I welcome the Minister's contribution, although I hope that the report represents more than a "useful input", as he termed it, to the work of his Department. Although the Minister listed all those who sit around the table in Dungannon, the evidence provided by his officials was that the implementation of the pilot is restricted to

school and public transport. I welcome his acknowledgement that something needs to be done about the silo mentality, and I hope that he addresses that urgently. Unless that is addressed, the pilot and the potential advances in our report are doomed to failure.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into the better use of public and community sector funds for the delivery of transport options; and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee: 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition'

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Moutray (The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on its 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition'.

In December 2012, the Committee agreed that its next priority was to review the issues of d'Hondt, community designation and provisions for opposition. The Committee also agreed that although each was a separate issue, the interrelationship between the three areas should also be considered, and that was made clear in the review's terms of reference. As Members will see, the terms of reference also made clear that the principles of inclusivity and power sharing should be safeguarded within the Northern Ireland institutions.

The Committee's detailed "call for evidence" paper was agreed in February 2013. It was made available on the Committee's webpage, and a signposting notice was published in three regional newspapers. The Committee also wrote to a range of stakeholders, including

academic experts and all political parties registered in Northern Ireland. The Committee received and considered 22 stakeholder responses to its review. It took oral evidence from Professor Derek Birrell, Professor Yvonne Galligan, Professor Christopher McCrudden, Professor Brendan O'Leary, Professor Rick Wilford, and Dr Robin Wilson and Ms Eileen Cairnduff from Platform for Change. The Committee also visited the Scottish Parliament and met representatives of the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body and the Parliamentary Bureau, in order to inform the review. On behalf of the Committee, I would like to sincerely thank all those who took time to respond to our call for evidence, particularly those who came to the Committee to give oral evidence and those in the Scottish Parliament who shared their experience and knowledge and extended their hospitality to our Committee members.

Before I refer to the conclusions in the report, I want to make clear the context within which the Committee worked. First, the complexity of the issues reviewed in the report should not be underestimated. I would like to thank the Assembly Research and Information Service for the research papers it prepared, which provided useful detail on the existing provisions both here and in the other legislatures throughout these islands. Secondly, each party came to the review with its own perspective. That was, I believe, well informed by the evidence gathered over the course of the review. Thirdly, the Committee had to take care to consider the existing structures and procedures in the institutions here, which were carefully crafted through various pieces of legislation and the Standing Orders of this House. Although the Committee's focus was to improve the effectiveness of the Assembly, it would not wish to do anything that would in any way affect the effectiveness and stability of our institutions. That caution was echoed by Professor McCrudden when he gave evidence at the Committee on 5 March 2013. He said:

"there is a danger in picking and choosing bits of another system and assuming that they will have the same effects when transferred to your system. We suggest considerable caution in that regard. The system is an organic whole and operates in a particular way."

The Committee gave a lot of thought to the various issues raised over the course of the review. Although it did not reach consensus on some issues — notably, whether the d'Hondt mechanism should be replaced and whether community designation should be retained — I

wish to assure the Assembly that the Committee considered and discussed those issues in some detail. Similarly, all the issues surrounding provisions for opposition were also considered in detail. Comparisons were inevitably made with other legislatures. However, the Committee remained mindful of our unique circumstances and the fact that these institutions, as I stated earlier, were carefully constructed to accommodate the spectrum of political opinions that exists here.

As the report states, there was recognition that parties already have the right to opt out of taking up their Executive entitlement following an election or to withdraw from the Executive at any time. The Committee also recognised that the principle of proportionality within our institutions should be protected. Therefore, although there were differing views on what rights should be afforded to non-Executive parties, there was consensus that those rights should broadly reflect the level of electoral support each party received.

Members will note that the Committee concluded that parties of the incoming Executive should, after an election, aim to agree a heads of agreement of a Programme for Government in advance of the formation of the Executive via d'Hondt. That would be an important development, particularly in the context of informal, non-Executive opposition parties.

The Committee identified two areas that merit additional work: technical groups and petitions of concern. Provision for technical groups might allay some of the concerns of smaller parties and independent Members in the Assembly. Therefore, the Committee felt that it would be useful for such provision to be reviewed. It would be fair to say that most respondents to our call for evidence expressed an opinion on petitions of concern. The Committee also received a briefing note from the Assembly Research and Information Service on the subject, as well as legal advice. It is a complex area that the Committee felt should be considered in greater depth, hence the conclusion that the issue will be reviewed in further detail.

The Committee gathered a wide range of evidence during the review. I encourage Members to read the responses to our call for evidence, and the Hansard reports of our evidence sessions, and reflect on the different opinions expressed in those. As I said, I hope that Members will appreciate the complexity of the issues that the Committee faced. Indeed, I hope that Members will also appreciate that the

Committee did its best to give those issues the detailed consideration that they deserve. I am in no doubt that all Committee members would say that the review process developed their thinking on those issues. That is a valuable outcome that should not be underestimated. It is now for the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive to develop and implement the Committee's conclusions.

On behalf of the Committee, I acknowledge and thank the Committee staff for their valuable work and support during the review. I also thank the Assembly Research and Information Service staff, the legal advisers and Hansard staff for their contribution to the review. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee requests that the Assembly note the Committee's report.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am speaking on behalf of my party on the review. I thank the Chair of the Committee, Stephen Moutray, for taking us through the discussion and, as he did, I thank the Committee Clerk and the staff for their work. I also thank all those who provided oral and written evidence.

As the Chair said, there was wide-ranging discussion throughout. In many ways, it cleared the way and, as he said, informed our thinking on future decisions. Gabhaim buíochas libh go léir as sin.

As with all the work that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has done in the past, we are guided by what we consider to be the fundamental principles of the Good Friday Agreement, which are inclusiveness, representativeness and equality. That is how we arrived at the three topics in the review, and I note that the Chair said that, flowing from our discussions, there were issues around petitions of concern and technical groups. We look forward to discussing those in the future.

We are very clear that d'Hondt should continue. We received evidence on d'Hondt, and, at present, it seems to be the best model to guarantee or underwrite the need for inclusiveness and representativeness, so we are happy for it to continue. We are also happy for community designation to continue, and we put that forward in our submission.

We outlined our view of opposition, which is written into the report at paragraph 95. Some people approach the model of opposition as if it were an add-on to the system that we already have in place. However, Professor McCrudden had words of caution:

"there is a danger in picking and choosing bits of another system and assuming that they will have the same effects when transferred to your system ... The system is an organic whole and operates in a particular way."

When people provided evidence and commentaries, many pointed to the system of government and opposition at Westminster.

Indeed, when they do that, they nearly put it up as being the best model, yet they go on to argue that, if a party opts out of the Executive, it should be given Chair and Deputy Chair positions as a means of showing that opposition. In the Westminster model, it is the opposite. The Government hold on to the Chair and Deputy Chair positions and are precious about doing that because of the particular system. Indeed, when Brendan O'Leary gave evidence to the Committee on 5 March 2013, he said that one of the features of our arrangements is:

"you can decide not to participate in the Executive and yet, remarkably, receive your entitlement either to chairing or deputy chairing Committees, for which there is no analogue in the Westminster model of democracy. It seems to me that, for that reason, opposition parties get a very reasonable share of resources and opportunities under the existing system."

Therefore, you have a system that is described as organic in place for a particular reason, and then, all of a sudden, people want to change it. That is where the discussion should be.

1.45 pm

There is a rationale for wanting to change it — quite legitimately, for self-interest or party interest — but people often use models, and, when those models are examined, they do not exactly provide the answer that they seek; indeed, they undermine some of the arguments that people make. I suppose that that comes back to the rationale. At one time, people believed that the centre would remain in control. Indeed, Bishop McKeown alluded to that on 'Sunday Sequence', when he said that the assumption of the Good Friday Agreement was that the centre ground — the two parties — would remain in control. Now that they are no longer in control, the discussion around opposition seems to have increased. The system was put in place for a reason, and, in our view, that reason has not changed.

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

Mr McCartney: Therefore, we support the review.

Mr McDevitt: I am happy to support the report. I found the work of the Committee in preparing the report very useful. A fair few myths were left in the ditch, including the myth that we are not well funded here. I am afraid to say that our parties are well funded. We are all well funded, particularly the smaller parties. They are disproportionately well funded compared with how they would be funded in other jurisdictions, which, I think, is right and proper.

The other thing that is interesting about the report — *[Interruption.]* It is nice to welcome the smaller parties to what is effectively an extended Committee meeting. That is important, and we should look forward to their contribution today and reflect on it in as much detail as we can. The other interesting thing about the work was that we found that everything in the garden of the Good Friday Agreement was not all that bad and there was much in the Good Friday Agreement that seemed agreeable to everyone in the House. The principle of power sharing, for starters, appears to find practically unanimous support in the House, and the application of the d'Hondt formula as a method by which we can determine how we share power in the House appears to be recognised by all sides at this moment in time as best meeting our needs.

During the Committee conversations, it was interesting to note that it became obvious that all parties are very wedded to a strong Committee system, feel very defensive of the fact that we have very powerful Committees in the House and are anxious to see those Committees grow further, exercise even more influence over the work of the House and find ways of being able to deepen their accountability duty towards the Executive.

I am content with the report because, last November, I asked the SDLP at conference to endorse what we call d'Hondt opt-out; in other words, to endorse a model of government going forward that evolves the spirit and builds on the principles of the Good Friday Agreement and is still protective of the allocation of seats in a power-sharing Executive after an election using the d'Hondt formula but allows a party's explicit rather than implicit right to opt out. If you are going to ask parties to exercise a decision to opt out of something, it needs to be not only

because they did not do well in the election but because they do not really agree with the direction of travel.

Government is not meant to be about carve-up, and I do not think that there was ever any intention by those who penned the Good Friday Agreement or those of us who have been made custodians of it since — all of us in the House are custodians of it — to reduce the politics of this region to some type of carve-up. Therefore the fact that this report, with the support of all parties, with, I think, the exception of Sinn Féin on this specific point, invites us to step up to the challenge of, at the very least, agreeing the heads of a Programme for Government before we form an Executive, is a significant sign of slowly maturing politics here. If we are to build a credible democracy and deepen power sharing, it is essential that we do so on the strength of ideas and argument around the direction of society and not just on some sense of having shared power between the major parties representing the predominant communities. That is an important moment and one that we should reflect a little on.

I hope that, in the years ahead, government continues to be a big tent around here. I hope that every party that is entitled to sit at the Executive table still wants to do so, but the way they will be able to do that, so that people will have confidence in them doing so, will be by all of us beginning to put policy and the battle of ideas, rather than the battle of interests, at the heart of the critical decisions that will be made after an election.

Mr Beggs: At the outset of the debate, it is important to note that, although major decisions are ultimately taken elsewhere, the backdrop of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee has been worthwhile in examining the structures that exist and can exist in the future. We received evidence from a wide range of experts, and, again, that was helpful. We also considered how other jurisdictions do business. It is disappointing that one party — Sinn Féin — did not engage constructively in the process of trying to improve devolution in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin refused to back any changes during the work that the Committee undertook. That was not the approach of the Ulster Unionist Party. We think that institutions must change, adapt, grow and take into account the changing world around us. We cannot simply stay as we are.

The Committee considered three principal areas, the first of which was the d'Hondt process. We understand that d'Hondt should pertain in the short to medium term. However,

it is tied to other issues, such as the creation of an opposition. In Northern Ireland, it is important that an equitable mechanism for allocating cross-community ministerial places and Chairs is in place, especially when there is a coalition Government in place. We want to avoid stalemate, and it should be possible and should not be a huge deviation from the principles set down in the Belfast Agreement — or the St Andrews Agreement, to make others happier.

It is also important to look at what happens when we depart from the agreed mechanism. For example, the Alliance Party has two Ministers, while bigger parties have only one: how did that happen? That is something that we must rectify. We have been clear that the allocation of the Justice Ministry, on a cross-community basis, should count towards a d'Hondt pick. That would be fair.

I also think that there is merit in running d'Hondt concurrently with Ministers and Chairs to allow for proportionality. That point was made on a number of occasions in Committee meetings. A party that opted not to take up a ministerial place to which it would be entitled, whilst not receiving additional resources — in fact, it would receive less — could choose to concentrate its scrutiny of the Executive through prominent roles in Committees. What would be wrong with that? It would, surely, make life more interesting in Northern Ireland politics.

On community designation, our clear view is that moving away from community designation and towards a weighted majority should be welcomed. It would represent a normalisation of politics here. Again, we could maintain the current requirement for cross-community voting, so that one community would not dominate another. What would be wrong with that? We have to aspire to more normal government.

There would also be an opportunity to restructure the current petition of concern, which is, clearly, being abused regularly. Perhaps, the most striking case of that occurred recently, when the DUP used a petition of concern to knock down an Ulster Unionist amendment that was supported by virtually the whole of the rest of the Assembly. That was never envisaged when the concept of a petition of concern was established. It is a clear abuse of the system. It is being operated not for good governance but for narrow party political advantage.

We have long heard the view that the best form of government is one that has an official

opposition. We want to move towards that. Voters would then have a more significant role in changing Ministers, following the outcome of an election. At present, there is a certain degree of apathy because, no matter how you vote, you can be sure that certain individuals will pop up and be Ministers. That does not encourage or empower voters to bring about change. We should all be open to how we can move towards that and bring it about.

Scrutiny and accountability would undoubtedly improve if there were an empowered official opposition. We wish to move towards that. We must also address the current apathy amongst voters, give them clearer choice and provide alternatives as to which parties they wish to govern Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Beggs: It is not helpful to look at opposition in financial terms, but, rather, it should be a question of what resources, functions and provisions are needed to have an effective opposition in place.

Mr Speaker: Order. Question Time commences at 2.00 pm. I ask the House to take its ease until then. We will certainly return to the debate after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Stewart Dickson.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Accident and Emergency Departments: Waiting Times

1. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the accident and emergency departments that are not meeting the target of having no patient waiting longer than 12 hours. (AQO 4443/11-15)

9. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how the average percentage of patients being seen within four hours at accident and emergency departments compares with England. (AQO 4451/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 1 and 9 together, as they are both about emergency department waiting times.

The latest performance figures for emergency care are for May 2013 and are provisional at this stage. During May, a total of 299 patients waited for more than 12 hours in 10 hospital emergency departments across the region. The vast majority of patients — 99.2% in 2012-13 — are discharged home or admitted to a ward well within the 12-hour target. During the quarter ending 31 March 2013, in Northern Ireland, 74.1% of patients attending emergency care departments were either treated and discharged home or admitted within four hours, compared with 94.1% in England. Even one person waiting unduly long for treatment is unacceptable to me, and I will continue to press the Health and Social Care Board and trusts to eradicate lengthy waits.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I agree that the figures are unacceptable and that even one person waiting is too many. I welcome the new A&E facility in Antrim, but I am deeply concerned about nursing numbers and today's whistle-blowing revelations. Can the Minister confirm that 20 additional nursing posts will actually be created? If so, when will that happen?

Mr Poots: People should be aware of the nursing posts because they were advertised in a very public way. The appointment processes have taken place. I think that the hospital intends to readvertise for one senior grade nurse because of the lack of a suitable applicant. As I understand it, the other nursing posts have been filled. New additional nurses are in Antrim Area Hospital. Previously, additional nurses were employed in Antrim hospital on a permanent basis in areas where there was far too great a reliance on locums. In the past year, I believe, some 40 nurses were made permanent. So we are going down the route of having more permanent nurses on site. Permanent nurses deliver a better service than locum nurses because they are on the same ward day by day and know the issues and their patients better, so it makes good sense.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. I was disappointed that he felt it necessary to group the questions rather than giving a substantial answer to each.

Recent figures for waiting times in England have been described as representing a crisis over there, yet they are still significantly better than those in Northern Ireland. Does he accept that, had he been a Minister in England, he would have been hounded out of office by now?

Mr Poots: Maybe so — we would have to wait and see. However, if you are going to hound Ministers out of office, perhaps you should consider that, in 2008-09, 2,280 people were left waiting and, by the time the then Minister left office, 7,379 people were waiting for more than 12 hours. So, if you want to talk about Ministers not performing, you had better look a bit closer to home. Thankfully, last year, we had fewer people waiting for more than 12 hours than when your Minister left office.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers, which help to build a bigger picture of our A&Es. Minister, I totally agree with you that permanent staff — nurses and doctors — deliver a better service. Can you give us an update today on the recent incident in the A&E at the Royal, where over 100 patients seen by a locum doctor have been recalled?

Mr Poots: The information that I can give you is this: a doctor was employed, as I understand it, at registrar grade — I think that the doctor is a consultant but was employed at registrar grade — and they had no concerns about the background information on the individual and felt that it was safe to employ him. It was later

discovered that there was the potential that a couple of cases had not been appropriately diagnosed following the reading of X-rays and so forth. Thereafter, they decided to recall all the patients he had dealt with in similar circumstances. That amounted to just over 90 patients, I believe. All of that is a little sketchy, because I do not have the facts and figures in front of me. However, that is my recollection. I have not had any indications that there have been adverse outcomes as a result of it, but it was recognised to be a problem. I think that the Belfast Trust responded promptly in dealing with the situation. That is a demonstration that we can have some confidence that the system actually works, in that it identified that people had not been treated as well as they should have been in the first instance and a check was then taken on all the patients who were treated.

Mr Durkan: Can the Minister tell the House whether he is taking any steps to address the shortage of A&E consultants at Altnagelvin and the difficulties that that creates?

Mr Poots: That is a matter directly for the Western Trust. I know that the Western Trust has been talking to the HSCB about the issue. It has indicated that, should there be opportunities for further A&E consultants to become available, the Western Trust would have first claim on them. I support the Western Trust in that, because I know that, in spite of performing very well, Altnagelvin has a fairly low number of consultants compared with many other facilities. Thankfully, however, Altnagelvin hospital performs well, certainly in comparison with many other hospitals across Northern Ireland, and is to be commended and congratulated for that. The trust is doing the right thing in seeking further consultants for that facility.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should note that question 6 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Hydraulic Fracturing: Health Risks

2. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if the Public Health Agency has any evidence to show that the process of hydraulic fracturing poses no risk to human health. (AQO 4444/11-15)

Mr Poots: Public Health England (PHE), formerly the Health Protection Agency, provides specialist advice and support to Departments and agencies across the UK on a wide range of health protection matters. PHE is currently reviewing the potential health impacts of shale

gas extraction using the process commonly known as fracking. It is anticipated that that report will be available in the near future. The Public Health Agency will be guided by this advice.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for that. Does he know whether that will include any investigations that have been carried out in areas where fracking is ongoing? If so, how detailed will those investigations be?

Mr Poots: In its consideration of hydraulic fracturing, my Department has been monitoring developments and has considered reports from other countries, including the report by the Office of the Chief Medical Officer concerning shale gas development in New Brunswick, Canada, where it is taking place already. So, it is a matter that we will take seriously. We will address it appropriately and in a very professional way. People would do well to pay attention to the information that we obtain. That will be the information that has real relevance, not like some of the stuff that you see on internet sites.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will be aware that an ongoing review is being carried out by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in the South and the Environment Agency (NIEA) in the North. To date, the draft terms of reference make no reference to public health. Can the Minister confirm whether he would support elements of public health being included as part of that ongoing cross-border work?

Mr Poots: The Environmental Protection Agency in the Republic has commissioned a comprehensive study. It is being co-funded by the EPA, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources and the NIEA. Outputs from that research will assist regulators in fulfilling their statutory role regarding this activity, if indeed it is to progress. It is likely that the research programme will take around two years to complete. The EPA intends to publish interim reports while the report is under way.

Mr Eastwood: What discussions has the Minister had with other relevant Ministers on fracking?

Mr Poots: I have not had discussions with other Ministers on the issue, because, at this point, all that is being done is exploration. If it comes to the point where other Departments see fit to move ahead, the health impacts and

whether or not they exist is something that we will discuss. We will discuss the health impacts on the basis of the professional information that we have sought. That will happen in due course, when necessary. At this point, an exploration is taking place, and there are no concerns about health consequences from that exploration. When it comes to the matter of hydraulic fracturing, we will have those discussions with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Department of the Environment.

Ms P Bradley: Will the Minister provide an update on the shale gas regulators' forum, please?

Mr Poots: DETI established the Shale Gas Forum, which first met in October last year. The purpose of the forum is to co-ordinate the activities of the various Departments and regulatory bodies and to ensure a joined-up approach to regulation and monitoring. As public health concerns have been raised, DHSSPS and the Public Health Agency have been invited to attend meetings of the group.

Northern Health and Social Care Trust: Alcohol-dependent Patients

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what provision is available in the Northern health trust area for alcohol-dependent patients. (AQO 4445/11-15)

Mr Poots: There is a range of information and advice, intervention, harm reduction and treatment and support services available in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) for those who misuse alcohol. The trust's addiction service provides an individually tailored, non-judgemental, confidential and accessible service to adults who are experiencing problems with alcohol or drugs. The service offers a range of approaches that include community-based assessment, treatment, management and support and inpatient hospital treatment, if indicated. A stepped-care approach is used to ensure that clients receive the most appropriate level of care. Residential services are available for individuals who experience significant dependency problems with alcohol and drugs for whom other services have not been sufficient in helping, or for individuals with complex needs.

The NHSCT addiction service works with other health and social care teams to respond to the complex needs of clients. Those include liver

specialists, mental health teams and probation and criminal justice teams. The addiction service also works in partnership with a range of partner agencies to provide a comprehensive range of support. These wrap-around services include housing, benefits advice, personal development programmes, family support and educational and vocational services.

Mr Campbell: Recently, my colleagues and I met some voluntary and community groups that are working, particularly, with young people who are involved in alcohol dependency activities and drug use. Can the Minister ensure that the professionals in the addiction service will work closely with those community and voluntary working groups, particularly in Coleraine, to assist those who have a difficulty with alcohol and drug use?

Mr Poots: It is absolutely essential that we work with local communities. Community and voluntary organisations often bring something to the table that we are not capable of doing in the government sector. Therefore, it is important that we pay attention to them and listen to the messages that come from them. If Members, in general, find that there are issues or problems, they should raise those matters with the trusts. They should seek a more positive outcome, if they feel that not enough is being done on the collaborative work that needs to take place with the voluntary sector.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We have seen the reports of the recent deaths attributed to drugs, and we sympathise with the families. What is the involvement of the Public Health Authority on a regional strategy?

Mr Poots: The Public Health Agency is heavily involved. We have the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2, which is a strategic plan with regional and local outcomes to address the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse in Northern Ireland. Approximately £8 million each year is allocated to its implementation, and we have tasked the PHA and the HSCB, as commissioners of alcohol and drugs services, to develop a commissioning framework for alcohol and drugs services across Northern Ireland. The purpose of the framework is to improve the consistency of services provided and to ensure that they are in line with best practice and emerging evidence. The framework was first issued for consultation in March 2013 and is being finalised in the light of responses received. We would appreciate it if any Member wishes to

make a response. It is anticipated that that work will be finalised in August 2013.

2.15 pm

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for his replies so far. Has the number of people presenting with alcohol dependency increased or decreased in the past five years? Has the number of programmes in the trusts across the North increased or decreased? Will the Minister compare the two figures?

Mr Poots: There has been some more positive news about people drinking. Fewer people are binge drinking. The proportion of men in Northern Ireland who drink over the recommended weekly limit has fallen from 33% in 2002-03 to 27% in 2010-11. The proportion of adult drinkers who binge drink has fallen from 38% in 2005 to 32% in 2008 and 30% in 2011. The proportion of young people aged 11 to 16 who reported getting drunk in 2010 was 23% against a baseline of 33% in 2003. All that is positive, but it is not good enough. We need to go further. That is one reason why we are looking at a minimum price for alcohol because it is vastly cheaper than it was many years ago. Therefore, the opportunity for young people to participate in abusive drinking is very significant. We need to minimise that potential.

Illegal Drugs: Community Initiatives

4. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the action he has taken to promote community initiatives to remove illegal drugs from the streets. (AQO 4446/11-15)

Mr Poots: Recent potential drug-related incidents, including sudden deaths, reinforce the need for my Department, the Department of Justice and the PSNI to work with our local communities to prevent and address the harm related to alcohol and drug misuse. Phase 2 of the new strategic direction for alcohol and drugs, which was launched in 2012, highlights that need. Through the strategy, a number of services are available across Northern Ireland, including education and information; prevention and early intervention; community support; harm reduction; and treatment and support.

I recently launched the RAPID — remove all prescription and illegal drugs — drug safe box in Connswater shopping centre. The initiative was developed by community and voluntary groups, Belfast City Council, the policing and community safety partnership, and the health service. Individuals can take any illegal drugs

or unused prescription pills and deposit them in the drug safe box. That is a pragmatic and practical response to substance misuse and a way of removing dangerous substances from the community. The substances can also be tested to enable us to provide clear public health messages. Other drug disposal bins are available in other areas across Belfast, including four in north Belfast and Sandy Row.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he give us an update on the recent deaths in Belfast and the one in County Londonderry?

Mr Poots: Interestingly enough, in my most recent conversations, the connection between all eight deaths does not exist, other than there being eight unexplained deaths. If people are looking for a single bad batch of drugs as the problem, they may be looking in the wrong direction. We need to verify that as time goes on. There may be a series of reasons, with drugs being the potential cause in a number of them. In some instances, it may be bad drugs, and in other instances, it may just be drugs. Over 100 people a year die because of drugs — over two each week. Let us be very clear. In recent weeks, the damage that drugs can do has been highlighted. However, the truth is that drugs do damage to our communities every week. That is why I am very clear that we need to step up to ensure that we wipe out drug dealing on our streets. That involves the community, the police and the courts working hand in hand to ensure that we remove this blight from our community.

Mr McCarthy: Given the seriousness of the situation, particularly over this recent while, will the Minister consider the comments he made on the radio this morning about the PSNI? Will he consider withdrawing that statement? Perhaps an apology to the PSNI is in order.

Mr Poots: I am glad to say that I have had a conversation with the Chief Constable. He made it absolutely clear that the police will go after anyone who is engaged in drug dealing and that there should be no untouchables. That is what the community wants to hear. Whether we like it or not, there is a perception among many in our community that there are people who are untouchable: those who are known to be trading in drugs and who do not appear to be being arrested for it. Let us get the message out to the community that they need to pass the information to the police. The police expressed a very clear willingness to me at the highest level this morning to pursue such individuals. Let us go forward with that confidence.

Mr Copeland: I thank the Minister for his measured and reasoned responses thus far. Does the Minister agree that any person who procures, supplies or administers any illegal drug to any person, which results in their death, should be viewed as morally, if not legally, guilty of manslaughter at the least and murder at the worst?

Mr Poots: I indicated my views on drug dealers yesterday and today. I think that they are pernicious people, who trade in what is potentially poison. They are providing that to people in their communities. We have to go after these despicable people in a lawful way. It is not the task of paramilitary organisations to go after drug dealers, nor is it the task of paramilitary organisations to protect drug dealers; there is an element of that in certain communities. What is important is the community's response to the PSNI in giving them the appropriate information, the PSNI's response in acting on that information to bring people to justice and the courts' response in giving these criminals decent sentences as opposed to treating them with kid gloves. I do not know anybody who disagrees with me on this issue, apart from the drug dealers.

Mr McDevitt: I want to press the Minister a little. This morning, the Minister said that he would not be surprised if the police were turning "a blind eye" to the activities of some drug dealers. I ask the Minister directly and explicitly whether he still holds that view this afternoon.

Mr Poots: I have certainly had experience over the years of dealing with these issues and of taking people, who have information, to the police so it can be acted on. Over the years, I have had those experiences, and that is a position that I understand because I work in my local community. However, I had my conversation with the Chief Constable, and today it is important that we focus on where the problem lies. It lies with people who think that it is all right to sell drugs illegally for a profit. The best means of taking those people out of the equation is for the community to say, "We do not want those people and we will inform on those people to the PSNI." It will then be for the PSNI to ensure that those issues are followed up and people are brought to court.

The Chief Constable made it very clear to me that there are no untouchables and that the police will go after people if they have information. I think that we have to take his word on that and ensure that that is the case. It is for members of the Policing Board to hold the Chief Constable and others to account, and it is

for the Chief Constable and other senior officers to give due regard to the Policing Board when they are held to account.

Children's Homes

5. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he is promoting high-quality provision in children's homes. (AQO 4447/11-15)

Mr Poots: Residential care operates as a key component of a whole-system approach to the provision of children and family care services. There remains a substantial demand for residential care services in Northern Ireland, and my Department invested £26.8m in children's residential care in 2011-12.

A recent review of children's residential care, undertaken by the Health and Social Care (HSC) Board, has now concluded and a draft report has been produced. The final report, which is due to be published in September/October 2013, will set the general direction of travel for the future provision of children's residential care services in Northern Ireland. My Department is also in the process of developing new standards for children's residential care homes, which will set the minimum standard of service provision that children and young people living in residential care can expect to receive. The standards are subject to public consultation, and it is intended that they will be published later this year. In addition, all HSC trusts operate a model of therapeutic intervention across all children's residential care facilities.

Finally, the HSC Board and the Youth Justice Agency are working jointly to establish a new forensic adolescent consultation and treatment service that will provide specialist forensic input to assist in addressing the mental health and risk management needs of young people in the residential care, secure care and juvenile justice sectors.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will be aware that there has been an increase in the number of looked-after children (LAC), going from 2,511 to 2,644 since 2011. Will the Minister comment on that increase and on how it compares with the rest of the United Kingdom?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for her question. I also thank her for her ongoing interest in that particular issue and for the work that she does on it. I actually welcome the rise. People may find that somewhat surprising, but it is a

demonstration that more work is being done to identify children who are in potentially neglectful or abusive situations. I want the figures to go down, but I suspect that they will have to go up before they go down, because we are doing that work.

Abuse and neglect remain the main reasons for children living apart from their families. In addition, more adolescents are becoming looked after due to family breakdown. There was also an increase of 102 young people aged 16-plus in the care system in the 2011-12 figures. That is due in part to the ageing of young people in the looked-after system. It also reflects the changes in how health and social care trusts actually respond both to young people in that age range who require intervention and to judicial expectations.

Other factors relate to changes in society. The economic downturn cannot be discounted, because it adds further pressures on families that are on the edge of the care system. There is an ongoing dilemma for the health and social care trusts as they seek to engage kinship carers as support to families but believe that, in the light of various legal judgements, the correct response is to confer looked-after children status on children. Trends in numbers of LAC can ebb and flow, with numbers recently ranging from 2,400 to the current figure of 2,644. I am confident that my social work teams are more effective than ever in identifying children who are in danger of neglect and abuse. That is something that we need to continue with to remove children from situations where harm may come to them.

Mr McCallister: Does the Minister not accept that the best outcome for children would be to speed up the adoption process? I know that a Bill is being framed, but the delays in that are significant, given that he has been Minister now for two years and there has been no progress. When are we going to see a much faster system of adoption to help protect children from having to go into residential care?

Mr Poots: I am very keen to move that legislation forward, but, of course, I need Executive approval to do so. That is a piece of legislation that I would welcome, and I think that speeding up the adoption process would be positive. I should also say that we recently held a meeting, which I convened. Minister Ford was in attendance, as were all the relevant people from the Department of Justice, including Lord Justice Maguire, as well as all the relevant people from health and social care. One of the concerns that was expressed at that meeting was that, whenever a social worker

raises an issue about a child, it can take up to 11 months for that to go through the court system. Eleven months may seem a relatively short space of time for people of our age, but it may be half of a child's lifetime. That is not good enough for providing the care and security for that child that is at potential risk of neglect and abuse. It is not an issue that the Department of Justice and the Department of Health are beating each other up about. It is an issue that we need to work on and to co-operate on. I think that we had a very positive round-table meeting on that day and that more positive things will be derived from that. We will continue to work on it.

2.30 pm

Justice

Rowan Sexual Assault Referral Centre

1. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the appointment of independent sexual violence advisers to the sexual assault referral centre. (AQO 4457/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The establishment of the Rowan, Northern Ireland's regional sexual assault referral centre (SARC), is a significant step forward in supporting all victims of sexual violence and abuse. It will provide victims of rape and serious sexual assault with a safe, secure and confidential environment. It is a key initiative to tackle sexual violence and abuse and is an excellent example of partnership-working between all the relevant Departments and agencies. Sexual violence is a serious problem in Northern Ireland, and it affects people from all cultural, social and ethnic backgrounds and across all age groups.

Independent sexual violence advisers (ISVAs) are intended to be specialist support workers who assist and help victims of sexual assault and abuse in the weeks and months after an assault. They will be accessed through the SARC. To secure funding for the ISVA service, my Department is required to produce a robust business case, which will depend on operational data collected over some months.

Work has been ongoing between my officials and key stakeholders to define and develop the roles of the ISVA and any links to the independent domestic violence advisers, given the link between domestic and sexual violence.

Those roles will evolve as the Rowan becomes fully operational.

It is therefore not possible at this stage to provide a definitive time frame for the appointment of ISVAs. That will be dependent on producing a business case and on securing funding. In the interim, the Rowan will refer victims, with their consent, to the appropriate support services.

Ms Brown: I thank the Minister for his answer, although I am somewhat disappointed by it. I am sure that he will agree that the role of ISVAs in the SARC is crucial and that many other SARCs have seen the benefits of having such advisers. Hopefully, ISVAs will become a reality in the SARC so that they can help victims of sexual abuse and rape to cope with their circumstances and also help to secure convictions. Will the Minister support those comments?

Mr Ford: I thank Ms Brown for her comments. When it comes to ensuring best evidence, the important work is that which is done in the SARC rather than the ongoing work of the ISVAs. As I pointed out, there is also the issue of referral, which affects those agencies already in operation.

The Member highlighted the issue of ISVAs operating in some other SARCs. I am certainly aware of some across the water that have taken many years to get ISVAs approved. I hope that we will examine the business case significantly faster than that.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give an assurance that no victim will suffer as a result of there being no advisers in place?

Mr Ford: I can certainly give Mr Lynch an assurance that the opening of the Rowan is a very positive and significant step forward in meeting the needs of victims of sexual violence. It will assist in the medical care and counselling of victims and in providing criminal evidence on their behalf. Obviously, we will have to examine the issue of the business case to see exactly how the SARC will develop in the future.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answers. I find it strange that the Rowan was opened without the business case having been done. Why was it not worked on beforehand?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that the answer is very simple. The business case requires operational

data, which cannot come through until the centre is in operation.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should have told Members that questions 2 and 11 have been withdrawn.

Community Safety College

3. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Desertcreat college capital project. (AQO 4459/11-15)

Mr Ford: I informed the Assembly on 21 May that the construction tender cost was some £30 million higher than budget and that the project board had established a working group that sought measures to deliver cost reductions while not affecting the overall operational functionality of the college. A business case addendum with options based on that work was presented to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and my Department for consideration. Several issues were identified with the addendum, and the project board revised the document and resubmitted it accordingly. Various cost-saving measures have been identified that do not significantly reduce the functionality of the college. This business case addendum is being considered by the two Departments.

Although it is not yet possible to give a new final cost for the build, I can report that substantial progress has been made in reducing the cost overrun; but it remains likely that the final cost will exceed the original budget. Should this addendum demonstrate that an integrated college at Desertcreat represents value for money and is affordable, it will be submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for approval.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that a breakdown in relationship should not become a ready made excuse for a blockage to progress reform, given that questions 3 and 10 were supposed to be grouped?

Mr Ford: I agree with Mr Boylan that there should be no breakdown in the progress that is necessary to make the college project go forward. That is why intensive work has been done by the two Departments. That work is continuing to ensure that we get the best possible value for money and the best possible training facility for the three services.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers. In light of recent revelations and the need to protect the public interest by delivering a good project and protect the public purse and payment to contractors, will the Minister outline the due diligence that has been exercised during the procurement process? Could some sort of added protection be given through the introduction of project management accounts for the scheme?

Mr Ford: Although I take Mr McGlone's point, I cannot go into detail because much of what he is asking for is the concern of the project board. My concern is to ensure that we get the best possible value for money and that we have a viable working project that operates for the benefit of, as far as possible, local businesses, in providing for the construction, and the ongoing needs of the services.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his responses. Is he concerned that the level of reduction and scaling back in the proposed works at Desertcreat will result in a project with facilities much reduced from those originally proposed?

Mr Ford: I assure Mrs Overend that that is not the case. The cutbacks have been done in such a way as to not damage the functionality of the college. I have previously highlighted some areas where cutbacks have been possible, and we are fine tuning the revised addendum to the business case, which will ensure that we get something that is value for money. The detailed work is being pursued by officials in the two Departments.

Mr Givan: Is the Minister still confident that he will be cutting the first sod in October this year, as previously indicated? Is he also aware of any investigation into any aspect of the design, procurement or development of the scheme that relates to financial matters of a potentially criminal nature, which has been requested?

Mr Ford: No, I am not aware of an investigation of criminal matters relating to financial management, though Members are well aware of the problems that arose around the consultancy regarding costs. As to whether I am confident that I will be cutting the first sod in October, we hope that the contract will be on site in the autumn of this year. Whether the project board invites me or the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is, of course, up to its members.

Youth Integration

4. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Justice what strategies his Department has to improve youth integration. (AQO 4460/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am committed to working with my Executive colleagues to build a society that young people feel they can belong to and, in turn, can make a positive contribution to. My officials are engaging with their counterparts across Departments to continue to develop those links. For example, the Youth Justice Agency is providing practical support for a wide range of youth and community based organisations across Northern Ireland, particularly in interface areas, to deliver a range of initiatives, with the specific aim of diverting young people away from offending. Those interventions include adventure learning and sporting activities, residential courses, family support and educational activities.

The Probation Board also works directly with youth and community groups and has developed links to facilitate unpaid community service by young people for the benefit of their local communities. The Probation Board also funds activities, including those that aid youth integration and diversion and desistance from offending.

The Department also contributes to summer interventions through its Priority Youth Interventions initiative, which is specifically targets engaging with those young people who are most at risk of becoming involved in interface violence or are most at risk when community tensions are heightened. That initiative has made funding of £100,000 available this year, through policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs).

Mrs McKeivitt: I thank the Minister for his reply. Programmes that promote youth integration to reduce the number of young people who get involved in sectarian violence are very important. Does the Minister have a timescale for rolling out the programmes that his Department is offering to communities? Will the neighbourhood policing teams across our region be delivering those programmes?

Mr Ford: I thank Mrs McKeivitt for those positive words about the work that is being done. It is clearly a very significant issue at this time of the year. We need to do all that we can to divert young people from getting involved in violence, given the potential consequences in the form of damage to their future lives. I cannot give a direct indication of the roll-out of funding since,

as I said, most of these projects are delivered by either PCSPs or arm's-length bodies, such as the Youth Justice Agency or the Probation Board. However, if there are specific issues that she wishes me to investigate, I will happily do so.

Prison Service: Temporary Promotions

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice how many positions in the Prison Service are currently filled by people who are temporarily promoted. (AQO 4461/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Prison Service currently has 104 individuals on temporary promotion. Of those, 78 are at Prison Service operational grades and 26 are at general service grades.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give the House an assurance that the impact of those 104 temporary promotions will not be the prevention of full implementation of the reform package?

Mr Ford: I can happily give Mr McKay that assurance, because, in fact, a number of the temporary promotions are related to the reform package. For example, of the 21 Prison Service staff currently promoted to principal officer grade, 16 are on short-term training posts related to the intake of new officers and the need to provide additional staffing to the college. Others are related to temporary work as we work to implement the target operating model that will deal with the overall management and staffing of the prison. As we look to the months later in this year and seek to put formal promotions in place, we will see a significant reduction in the number of temporary promotions. A number of those posts will come to an end completely. It was a necessary stage to go through to put new staffing structures in place, and it is an essential part of the prison reform programme.

Mr Elliott: Does the Minister accept that there is huge disappointment among many locally recruited Prison Service staff that they have been overlooked for promotion? What action is he taking to address that?

Mr Ford: I do not quite take Mr Elliott's point on the basis that temporary promotions are offered to existing staff under the normal Civil Service procedures for making temporary promotions. Therefore, existing staff were eligible for those posts. Existing staff will also be eligible to apply when we move to make those posts

substantive. So, I do not see how existing staff are negatively affected in any way.

Mr A Maginness: One hundred and four temporary promotions seems a significant number. It also seems that that is contributing to a degree of uncertainty among current staff about their future. Would the Minister not prefer these matters to be resolved by way of permanent appointments as soon as possible?

Mr Ford: Yes; I agree with Mr Maginness. I wish the posts to be resolved as soon as possible. My understanding is that in excess of 70 of the posts are likely to be resolved in the autumn.

Lord Morrow: My question is not dissimilar to Mr Maginness's, but I would like the Minister to elaborate a wee bit. There are 104 members of staff in temporary positions. Does the Minister not accept that that brings a considerable degree of instability to the whole prison regime? The confidence of the whole Prison Service is affected. I have received much representation on the issue, as I am sure many other MLAs have.

Mr Ford: I do not believe that it brings instability. The reality is that we are going through a significant programme of reform. As Members will know, we had a voluntary early retirement scheme that had over 500 applications. We hope to be able to allow all of those 500 people to go, subject to finance, in the relatively short period of the reform programme.

That is all resulting in significant change. Implementation of the target operating model is producing differences in the way in which work is to be done in different units in the three prisons, which is why there have been a number of temporary promotions as well as the training posts that I referred to earlier. The fact that we are seeking to rationalise that and deal with the great majority of them in this calendar year shows that we are managing to make the changes effectively and speedily.

2.45 pm

Bangor Courthouse

6. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Justice whether he will delay placing Bangor courthouse on the open property market to enable him to explore the potential for it to become a community asset transfer project. (AQO 4462/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is working with Land and Property Services to secure an alternative use for Bangor hearing centre. A marketing strategy is being developed in line with government guidelines on the disposal of surplus public sector property. The community asset transfer policy is currently subject to consultation. Implementation is unlikely to be effected before the autumn. The time required to progress both processes should allow any interested party to register interest in the property. I am aware that the Member has visited the hearing centre, and I have written to him to offer a meeting with my officials.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for his answer and for agreeing to a meeting with officials from his Department. When looking at community asset transfer, the Minister will, of course, ensure that his Department gets good for value for money from any future use of the site, but does he agree that we need to look at public value and value to the community, not just pounds and pence?

Mr Ford: I remind Mr Agnew that, whatever his enthusiasm may be as a Member for North Down, I am required to go by the guidance that Land and Property Services gives on the valuation of the building. It is therefore not a matter of the Department of Justice seeking to be generous and provide community benefit on its own. I suggest that he probably needs to continue the work being done with North Down Borough Council and others to see whether we can find an alternative use.

Mr Dunne: Given the substandard court provision in Newtownards, has the Justice Minister any plans for a new, purpose-built facility for the north Down and Ards area?

Mr Ford: It is difficult to answer a question that starts with an utterly unacceptable premise. The accommodation in Newtownards is not substandard.

Mr Cree: Have any informal discussions been held with the local council on the issue, bearing in mind the imminence of RPA?

Mr Ford: I can confirm to Mr Cree that discussions have been held between my officials and officers of North Down Borough Council. I know that there is potential interest in developing arts and community use of the courthouse, but these are early, relatively informal discussions.

Prisoners

7. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Justice how many hours per day are prisoners locked up. (AQO 4463/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has been aware of criticism that prisoners are being locked in their cell for too long. It is recognised that a worthwhile and productive regime is to the benefit of prisoners' resettlement and general well-being. The implementation of the new target operating model has had a positive impact, and further improvements will be delivered when NIPS has the correct number of staff. Governors report that the number of regime restrictions so far this summer is well down on the same period last year. However, regime restrictions increase in the context of high levels of staff sickness absence and in the context of staff deciding not to work overtime. Steps have been taken to ensure that resources are targeted to provide for a core day between 8.00 am and 7.45 pm, and they are showing improvements in the time out of cell. The length of time a prisoner is locked in their cell can vary for a number of reasons, including whether he or she is engaged in employment or education. Two hundred and eighty prisoners assessed as low risk, which is over 15% of the prison population, are not locked in at all. During the night, they are secured on their landing but can freely associate with others. That regime is available in certain locations in all three establishments.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. The prison review oversight group expressed concerns about long periods of isolation affecting prisoners' physical and mental health. How will the new target operating model address that problem?

Mr Ford: I appreciate Mr McMullan's point, but he highlights what came from the prison review team, and significant progress has been made since. In particular, a lot of work is being done on the team's recommendation to make Hydebank Wood a secure college. Work is being done using the Foyleview unit at Magilligan to enhance the opportunities that prisoners have to engage in constructive activity. We are looking at reopening the prisoner assessment unit (PAU) at Crumlin Road for prisoners leaving Magilligan, so a lot of significant work is going on. As I highlighted, we have recently managed to increase out-of-cell time significantly.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister has not given us any definitive timetable for improvements other than to say that work is ongoing. I am interested to know whether there is any correlation between the high number of self-harm incidents in prisons and those prisoners who have experienced excessive lock-down time.

Mr Ford: Mrs Kelly certainly makes a very significant point. I cannot give a specific mathematical correlation between them, but we are all aware that those prisoners who are most vulnerable suffer particularly if there are excessive times of in-cell only. That is why so much work is being done and why we have also the Donard centre in Maghaberry to deal with those who are most vulnerable. Work is ongoing, but I entirely acknowledge her point that a lot more is still to be done.

Mr Dickson: Minister, I welcome the comments that you made on the provision of a core day for prisoners. Will you outline further the activities that are planned for purposeful activity, and the benefits of that for prisoners?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Dickson for pointing out that it is a matter not simply of having cells open during the core day but of the opportunity to provide purposeful activity. Significant work is being done on learning and skills, particularly in Hydebank Wood, to give people more opportunity to engage in the kind of activity that will benefit them when they leave. For example, we are hoping that we will have an external provider taking responsibility for outsourced learning and skills services in Hydebank at the start of the next academic year in the autumn of 2014. Similar work is being done using the learning and skills centre that was opened relatively recently at Maghaberry, and significant work is being done at Magilligan to give people the opportunity to engage in work as they move to the Foyleview unit towards the end of their sentence. Those are all examples of work being done, but there is absolutely no doubt that a lot more needs to be done, which is where some of the early discussions that have been held with business organisations interested in providing training in prison and employment opportunities outside will be particularly beneficial, if they come through. All of them are currently at an early stage.

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister outline what actions he is taking to ensure that destructive activity does not occur during excessive periods of time when prisoners are locked up and that, in particular, availability of drugs, which

ultimately leads to destructive activity outside prisons, is targeted?

Mr Ford: Again, Mr Beggs has highlighted one of the problems that exist across this whole society, and prisons are not immune from it. A significant programme has been developed looking at the issue of targeted searching to deal with drugs and, indeed, with other contraband. That, rather than merely searching by routine, has produced some benefits in recent months. The intelligence-led approach appears to be having some benefits, but it is clear that action needs to be taken continually, both on prisoners who go out on leave or to court and, indeed, on prison visits, where there are considerable attempts to smuggle drugs in. A very robust effort is required by the Prison Service to defeat that.

Criminal Justice: Security of Employees

8. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Justice what discussions he has had with the Chief Constable regarding the level of threat to people working in justice-related positions from dissident republican terrorist organisations. (AQO 4464/11-15)

Mr Ford: I have regular meetings with the Chief Constable on a range of issues concerning security. That includes the level of threat from all terrorist organisations to different groups. In addition, my Department regularly keeps under review the level of threat to individuals holding justice-related positions to ensure that personal security measures can be provided and advice issued, as required, to those individuals within my ministerial remit.

Mr Campbell: Will the Justice Minister ensure that keeping it regularly under review will include, for example, personnel who have applied to get personal protection weapons because of their work in the justice domain in various parts of Northern Ireland that are under threat, particularly from dissident republicans? Will those personal protection weapons be given sympathetic consideration?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that the Member will have to take that question to another place and ask it of the Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office, who has that responsibility.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí. Is the Minister satisfied that all necessary steps are being

taken to ensure that people's safety is not compromised?

Mr Ford: I certainly think that the steps that can be taken by my Department are being taken. Clearly, however, there are issues, as I have just highlighted to Mr Campbell, that fall to the Northern Ireland Office, not to the Department of Justice. Most of those are the type of issues that have been highlighted by the two Members. Where a matter specifically falls to our employees — for example, home protection for prison officers — action has been taken in recent months to address that as best we can.

Women's Prison

9. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Justice for an assurance that the new prison for women will not be delayed in the event of any budget reallocation. (AQO 4465/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I informed the Assembly on 19 March, my intention is to develop a new separate facility for women offenders, combining provision for women who require secure custody and facilities for women for whom a community-based approach is more appropriate. NIPS officials are progressing a business case that will be subject to DFP scrutiny. However, the current planning assumption is that the development of a new women's facility will fall into the next Budget period. Therefore, funding will be determined as part of the Executive's next Budget process.

I am pleased to advise that Prison Service officials are investigating the potential to convert Alderwood House on the Hydebank Wood site into a step-down facility for women prisoners who are nearing the end of their sentence. Alderwood House is currently occupied by the Probation Board, which is sourcing alternative accommodation. Should everything go according to plan, the facility could be in use some time around spring 2014.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat. What measures are being taken in the interim to ensure that the particular needs of female prisoners are being met?

Mr Ford: There is certainly a specific regime that is as appropriate as can be for women prisoners in Ash House at Hydebank Wood. The Prison Service recognises the difficulties of managing women on that site. If Mr McElduff has other issues or particular points to make, I will happily address them, but I certainly believe that, given the constraints on the existing site, very significant changes are being made to

meet the needs of women. We are doing our best to manage circumstances under those difficulties.

Ms Lo: Last week, the Minister announced a review of security classifications for women prisoners. Will such flexibility in how women prisoners are categorised be extended to the new facilities that are being developed?

Mr Ford: I thank my colleague for reminding me of the answer that I should have given to Mr McElduff a few moments ago. Yes; part of the issue is that because the security classification is developed for the great majority of our prisoners, namely adult men, it has been applied to young offenders and women without necessarily considering their particular circumstances. The review will enable us to look at what the real needs are, because I think that there is a general assumption that a significant number of women who are in Ash House would have a very low security classification and do not require the sort of facilities there. The step towards using Alderwood House is one way in which we can develop things to get the right classification and the right level of support for vulnerable women who are in our custody.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Alex Maskey is not in his place to ask question 10. I call Ms Bronwyn McGahan.

DOJ: G8 Summit

12. **Ms McGahan** asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the costs of the G8 summit in relation to his Department's budget. (AQO 4468/11-15)

Mr Ford: The Government are responsible for compiling the total cost of hosting the G8 summit. As I understand it, the total policing and security cost is in the region of £70 million to £80 million. Members will be aware that the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced funding of £14.5 million in the June monitoring round to meet the total cost to the PSNI.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that some of the expense was incurred through the purchase of drones by the PSNI for use during the G8 summit, will the Minister indicate to the Assembly under what legal authority and licensing agreement the PSNI trained for and used that new equipment?

3.00 pm

Mr Ford: The only answer that I can give to that question is that it is an operational issue and should be referred to the Chief Constable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that this is the last Question Time before recess, will the Speaker investigate the number of questions, questions for written answer in particular, that remain unanswered by Ministers during this Assembly term? I tabled a question to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure on 15 May. The Minister had 10 days to make a response, and as yet I have received none. That is most unsatisfactory.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's comments are noted.

Committee Business

Assembly and Executive Review Committee: 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition'

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on its 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition'.—[Mr Moutray (The Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee).]

Mr Dickson: It has been frustrating to be involved in the drafting of this report. It was hard to find consensus, and, consequently, there is little in it that makes progress on the issues that we were looking at. However, it would be remiss of me not to place on record my thanks to the staff, the Chair and the Deputy Chair, who led us through those issues, and, in particular, the people who contributed to the report.

It is clear that some parties were not engaged with the review and gave incomplete answers to questions about how they envisaged the system should work in the future. That made it difficult to develop a coherent set of proposals for the Assembly to debate. In many cases, we were unable to reach consensus because some parties were not willing to make their positions clear or to engage in compromise.

As Members are aware, the report looked at d'Hondt, opposition and community designation. Lack of consensus on the establishment of a formal opposition was based partly on the idea that parties are free to opt out of their entitlement to Executive positions. There is a need to progress and move towards more normal politics in Northern Ireland. That means that we must eventually move towards voluntary coalition, negotiated between parties on the basis of a common Programme for Government. I believe that any incoming Executive should develop a Programme for Government between them and before they are subject to a cross-community vote in the Assembly. That would lead to a coherent Executive programme rather than to 12 different Executive programmes. It would also lead to better government. At the very least, the incoming Executive could be required to present a heads of agreement document. Until we can agree on a move to government and

opposition politics, that would at least provide for a more effective Executive.

Unfortunately, the Committee was also unable to agree on a replacement for community designation, a point that Mr Beggs made well earlier in the debate. The Alliance Party feels that there are four particular problems with the current system: the institutionalisation of sectarian division; the inequality of votes between elected MLAs; the inability to adjust to changing demographic and political circumstances; and the ability of political majorities to hold the process to ransom. The introduction of a system of weighted-majority voting would ensure cross-community support while avoiding some of those difficulties.

The Committee was again unable to reach agreement on recommending moves away from using d'Hondt to appoint Committee Chairs. I have long felt that a form of election by STV would be a better system for the appointment of Chairs.

The Committee agreed that further work on the role of petitions of concern needs to be undertaken. The events last week, when the DUP abused the petition of concern process to block environmental protections and community empowerment in the planning process, demonstrate the clear need for petitions of concern to be reviewed. Whatever anyone's position on those amendments — the Assembly made its position clear — it cannot be argued that this is a cross-community matter. This has led to a situation in which petitions of concern are now used simply to hold up issues that are opposed by the DUP and others. Eventually, normal politics must resume in Northern Ireland, with government, opposition and voluntary coalition. The current system does not allow for that, and the report, regrettably, does not move us much further forward.

Mr Campbell: I welcome the report and the discussions that were ongoing throughout the period. A number of Members alluded to the degree of consensus that emerged on a range of issues. Earlier in the debate today and in the debate yesterday on North/South issues, Mr McDevitt and one or two others kept referring to the Belfast Agreement and its place in providing the mechanism that made us arrive at where we are today. I can recall that, many decades ago, more than I care to remember — I think that there are only four Members in the House now who came in in 1982: Mr Allister for North Antrim; myself; Mr Robinson, the First Minister; and Mr Wells — we were all trying to arrive at a system of government that could encompass some form of responsibility across the divide

where some sort of stability would emerge. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, that did not work out, and we are where we are now. I just wish that people would not keep referring back to one agreement that has long since past its sell-by date and keep referring to it as if it was as fresh and fragrant as the morning dew. However, be that as it may, that is what they want to do.

Consensus was reached in a number of areas, and yet there are other areas where consensus was not reached. I am sure people will ask why the Committee did not reach a greater degree of consensus than it did. Although there are a number of reasons why that is the case, there is one overriding reason: the differences of outlook and opinion among political parties are considerable. My party believes in trying to build this structure and have it more deeply embedded in the United Kingdom, and another large party wants to try to detach us from the United Kingdom. As that party — Sinn Féin — distances itself slightly, hesitantly and with some difficulty from its terrorist, murderous past, progress can be made. As long as it keeps doing that, we will keep making progress. Some people might try to decry the progress, but if there is progress, we will acknowledge it and keep making progress. That is part of the reason why we cannot reach a wider consensus, but we will keep working at it. No matter how slow the learners are, we will keep working at it, regardless of how long it takes. That is what politics is about, and that is what we have to try to do. We have to try to achieve agreement and consensus to try to change the current position.

I think that most people would accept and concede that we need an opposition, and I want to confine my concluding remarks to that. We need to have an effective opposition in place because the last thing that people want to see is some sort of bureaucratic system here in Stormont where most of the parties comprise 90% of the elected representatives and make up an Executive where there is no challenge and no opposition, apart from the odd question for written answer about the cost of mint imperials in the Chamber. Apart from that, there is no effective challenging opposition to exercise the minds of those who are in government to try to ensure that they continue to make progress.

There was an issue about how effective the d'Hondt system was. Mr McDevitt alluded to the fact that it was widely agreed that it was the best method, although I do not think that that was the case. In the absence of another system on which we can get consensus, we are

left with d'Hondt. However, that is not quite the same as saying that it is the agreed method for all of us. There is more progress to be made, and, hopefully, when we reconvene in the autumn, we can pick up where we have left off today.

Mr Hamilton: It seems that the end-of-term feeling about this place has well and truly kicked in. I suspect that other Members are in their rooms wearing their own clothes and playing board games as though it were the end of a school term. *[Laughter.]* There seems to be a few more people here than when this debate started before Question Time. At one point before Question Time, there were not sufficient Members in the Chamber to form an Executive, never mind an opposition.

I welcome the debate and the opportunity to contribute to it. Reports of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee that come to the Chamber rarely have total agreement, or even partial agreement, such is the nature of the Committee. In my shared time on it, I have often referred to it as the Campbell doctrine. Decisions are not taken in the Committee; it is the Committee's role to scope out options, possibilities and areas of some consensus. I think that if people were to take an objective read of the report that is being submitted today, they would see that there are some areas — precious few, perhaps — where there is some consensus between all parties or the majority of parties about how we can move forward on those three important and interlinked issues.

To elaborate a little bit more on what Mr Campbell said, where my party's position is concerned, we take a view on these issues that has been consistent from the start. The issues are d'Hondt, opposition and community designation, which are what Mark Durkan referred to in a speech in Oxford a number of years ago as the "ugly scaffolding" of the Belfast Agreement. It is an ugly scaffolding that I think, and as most people would agree, needs to be dismantled.

As a party, we believe that it would be a sign of a more normal democracy if we were to have a properly functioning opposition as well as a government in this place. We believe that an opposition function should be facilitated in the House. We believe that a voluntary form of government would be far better than that which is enforced on us using the d'Hondt system. We believe that you cannot move forward to the sort of society, politics and democracy that we want if the very seeds of our division, through sectarianism, are enshrined by the fact that on day one, when somebody is elected into this

Chamber, they have to designate themselves as unionist, nationalist or other.

I want to dwell, as Mr Campbell did, on opposition, which I suspect will probably be what most Members will want to talk about during this debate. One area of consensus in the report is that there is an agreement among the majority of parties that sit in the Assembly and Executive Review Committee that there should be formal recognition for those parties that are entitled to be in government but that opt out of it. That concerns additional speaking rights, speaking time and time for business in the House. I think that party leaders can build on that agreement in their discussions on how we move forward on this issue.

One of the interesting things that we discovered as a Committee while we were investigating and conducting our review was that smaller, self-styled opposition parties in this House are well catered for and better catered for financially than other small parties and one-Member outfits in other Parliaments, including the Scottish Parliament. So the evil regime that resides in this place has been much more benign for smaller parties than perhaps some of them would think.

I also want to make the point that although I think that having an opposition in this place would be a good, positive thing and would be a sign of progress, it is not the answer to the problems that we have. To have an opposition that would make a difference, it would have to be an effective opposition. It would have to be an opposition that had a coherence and some policies to offer people as an alternative government. I do not accept for a second that the system of government that we have is as effective as it should be, but merely having an opposition is not in itself the answer to the problems that we have. It is the ugly scaffolding that causes the blockages, the delays, the inefficiency and the ability not to respond to things as quickly as we would want to. That is what needs to be dismantled first. The creation of an opposition will not necessarily lead to the problems that we have being answered. We will have some people who will —

3.15 pm

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

Mr Hamilton: I am sure that the contributions of some of the smaller parties will be about their dissatisfaction at what is being put forward by

the report and at the lack of movement, but as we listen to what they say —

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

Mr Hamilton: — Members need to remember to ask how they would achieve the objectives that they set out.

Mr McCallister: It was very good of Mr Hamilton to predict what I am going to say. Our new Finance Minister is a mind reader already.

It is fair to say that the report is a missed opportunity. Very little of it moves the debate on in any significant or meaningful way. All the areas that need to be looked at, which all contributors seem to be saying we should be looking at and talking about, appear to be pushed down the track. Members are saying, "Yes, we will look at them, and we will talk about them, and we will talk a bit more." Mr Campbell suggested that we will pick it up again in the autumn and talk a bit more, but there has been no real agreement on where the long-term strategy should go on this.

I take the point about the big issue of designation. I agree with Mr Hamilton's point that it is not a helpful situation at the minute that we designate as unionist, nationalist or other. In fact, Mr Dickson's point is that his designation does not count for anything: in a cross-community vote, his vote does not matter. He is simply keeping up his voting record. To all intents and purposes, that is all that it achieves for him.

There were other issues raised about the very fabric of an opposition. Mr Hamilton made a point about needing an opposition, but he said that it needs to have policies and to look and feel like an alternative. I accept that, but, at that point, you have to acknowledge that to do all those things, you will have to resource some of it. You will have to give an opposition speaking rights. You will have to make sure that it is in a fit state to challenge not only the governing parties but the entire machinery and apparatus of government that it will be up against. That is how you will get proper scrutiny of and provide a proper, credible alternative to the Government. Those are the two key things that an opposition must, and can, do.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that there was a fair degree of consensus in Committee on starting to move towards some form of opposition, except by Sinn Féin, which is quoted as saying that it does:

"not see a need for any sort of formal opposition, or an informal one for that matter."

Given that it seems to favour some form of North Korean junta, how do you propose that we move forward?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Yes, it is no great shock that Sinn Féin has traditionally had more of a North Korean, politburo, let-everyone-agree-with-the-Sinn-Féin-line-and-applaud-loudly style. That is the main Sinn Féin mantra. What we as other political parties have to do is keep on making the argument that although, yes, it got us from where we were in 1998 and has made progress to now, the system has outlived its usefulness. It is now time that the Assembly evolved, came of age and moved to normalise our politics, because the entrenched division that we have of unionist, nationalist and other is filtering down to our communities and is reflected in everything that we do.

Look at how we can trigger petitions of concern. To what do we get petitions of concern? We get them to the Caravans Bill, the Planning Bill and just about everything that we can imagine, because one party has the required number of seats to trigger them. It does not matter how often it abuses that process, for it can still do it. We get petitions of concern on numerous things, and, of course, that triggers the situation in which Mr Dickson's vote does not count. Is that a useful way to do business? I suggest that it is not. Does it sectarianise politics? Absolutely. At present, going by this report, we will keep doing that and heading that way.

Look at the all-inclusive Executive that Pat Sheehan was shouting about as listening to everybody. Look at what they deliver for us. We have an SDLP Minister who is now stuck with a Planning Bill that he does not really believe in or like. Right? We have an SDLP Minister who is legislating for a form of council that he does not like; which, in fact, the Ulster Unionist Party does not like and some in the DUP, I am led to believe, do not like, but, due to their North Korean-style of party management, they accept, although I am sure that none of them would say that openly.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCallister: Certainly, if you are quick.

Mr McCartney: In true North Korean style, we tried to ensure that the Member would have speaking rights in the Assembly.

Mr McCallister: I am delighted that you have tried to let us have speaking rights in the Assembly. I want you keep that campaign going and champion the cause of NI21. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr McCallister: You also —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member's speaking rights have run out. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: Here we have another non-report by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. It goes through the motions of a few platitudes here and there, presented by a Chairman, who dutifully reads out to us what is being presented and tells us all of the work that the Committee has done. However, when, at the end of that, one evaluates the report, one sees that it does not amount to a row of beans because we have been here so many times before.

It is proof positive, yet again, that the House will never self-regulate itself into a functioning, recognisable democratic chamber because the vested interest is such that clutching all power by those who are in power is the overriding consideration. Yes: they can afford to pay a little lip service and say, "Oh yes: we would like to have an opposition", but, in the same breath, just in case anyone would get out of line, they remind us, like Mr Hamilton did, how benign the dictatorship has been to the small parties by throwing them a few pounds to survive. I do not think that that washed with very many people.

In the report, I read talk about a technical group. Last autumn, in the Committee on Procedures, I proposed that we should put in motion measures to allow for a technical group. Who voted that down? It was the ruling cabal of the DUP and Sinn Féin. Frankly, it does not impress me to now find some token talk about a technical group when the very parties that control the House blocked that move, prevented it from already being in place and, now, say that, perhaps, it could be considered.

There is not a word in the report about revising the ludicrous situation in which only Executive parties are allowed to sit on the Business Committee, which determines the business of the House and ensures that no one from these

Benches ever gets any business on to the Floor of the House. There is not a word to say that, perhaps, we should just allow the six Members who are outside the Executive parties to have a voice on the Business Committee. Oh no: we could not do that.

It is no surprise, of course, that Sinn Féin is the party that champions the rejection of opposition. We are all too familiar with how the republican movement deals with opposition.

The bullet in the head in terrorism has its parallel in the opposition from Sinn Féin in dealing with the very suggestion of an opposition in the House.

Then, of course, we have some who pretend that they would like to move away from the architecture of the Belfast Agreement — the great pretenders in the House who pretend either that the Belfast Agreement does not exist or that they are not its prime implementers — when the truth is that they are its primary props, and without their propping role in the Assembly, the structures of the Belfast Agreement would not be in daily operation in the House.

Of course, such is the contempt for the basic tenets of democracy that the cheerleaders and proposers of the fact that we should even disrespect the electorate by, without notice or consultation, moving the Assembly, which was elected for four years, to five years are again the ruling cabal. So, everything about this report speaks to the suppression of democracy. *[Interruption.]* It is a matter of record that the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin supported the extension of the Assembly to five years to have the election in 2016. That is a matter of record. *[Interruption.]* What do the people matter in the view of those who have such disrespect —

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

Mr Allister: — for democracy that they cannot even contemplate opposition —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Allister: — in the House, —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will resume his seat.

Mr Allister: — such is their aversion and such is their attachment to the iniquitous Belfast Agreement —

Mr Deputy Speaker: His time is up.

Mr Allister: — the props of the Belfast Agreement — as stated day and daily.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to resume his seat, please.

Mr Sheehan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee):

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Members for their contributions to the debate. As the Chairperson outlined, the Committee received and heard evidence from a wide range of academics and other stakeholders, and I echo his thanks to all who contributed to the review.

I also wish to thank those in the Scottish Parliament who shared their experience and extended their hospitality to us; it was genuinely appreciated. People often talk about opposition normalising politics, and I can assure Members that we felt very normal when our Scottish counterparts shared their opinions with us. In some ways, none of them could agree on provisions for non-Executive parties either. Indeed, I recall Members of the Scottish Parliament describing the development of their institutions as an evolutionary process.

I am aware that the report may not have satisfied all Members of the House, but I am content that it reflects the very thorough and constructive examination of these issues by the Committee. As the Chairperson highlighted, the issues raised in this review were indeed very complex.

Furthermore, the Committee was conscious that the structures here are unique, and, as Professor McCrudden highlighted, they represent an "organic whole". Therefore, it is important to take that into account when looking at potential structural and operational changes here. As the Chairperson said, the Committee was also concerned that the principles of inclusivity and power sharing be safeguarded, as stated in the review's terms of reference.

The Committee reached a number of conclusions, as set out in the report and discussed during today's debate. While some of those conclusions may state that there was no consensus in the Committee on some issues, they reflect the debate that the Committee had on the current operation of our institutions and members' views on change. Such debate is an important and useful part of the democratic process.

Two of the conclusions recommended further work. One related to provisions for technical groups, which the Committee agreed should be reviewed. The Committee will be interested in the outcome of that review. Another recommendation was that the important area of petitions of concern merited further detailed examination.

3.30 pm

I do not propose to go through Members' contributions today; they have all been recorded by Hansard. If anyone is interested, I am sure that they can read them. I thank the Committee staff, Research and Information Service staff, Hansard staff and other Assembly staff who assisted the Committee in the review and in the production of the report. I ask the Assembly to note the Committee's report.

Removing my Deputy Chair's hat for a moment, I would like to say that the discussions in Committee were mild-mannered and temperate throughout. It is somewhat disappointing, therefore, to come into the Chamber and see Members showboating when the cameras are operational. We know that some Members, particularly down in the corner, are experts in showboating. However, I will leave that to the side for the minute. We had good discussions but could not always agree. The issues are complex, and the Committee performed its task well.

By the way, this Committee has been very productive. This is the third report that it has produced inside a year. I commend the officials of the Committee for the work that they have done.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Sorry?

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Mr Deputy Speaker, I speak to the Member every time I pass him. I say, "Good morning, Jim", "Hello, Jim" or, "How are you, Jim?" He never, ever responds. I thought that it was on a point of principle, but I now see that it is not. However, I am not prepared to give way — no thanks. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCartney: Not until he says, "Good morning".

Mr Sheehan: If you say, "Good morning" next time, I will consider it. *[Laughter.]* Maybe the

problem is that the Member just does not like me.

In any event, Mr Deputy Speaker, I commend the report to the House and ask the Assembly to note it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the report of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee on its 'Review of d'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition'.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Proposed Closure of Drumcree College, Portadown

Mr Deputy 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 six minutes.

Mrs D Kelly: I am indebted to my party colleagues for allowing me to raise the matter in the Assembly at this time. I am not sure whether the Minister hopes to come, given that it is also a constituency matter. I was hoping to have the last word with the Minister, but we will wait and see. Here he comes now, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister may or may not know that my name is Mary Dolores, two names that are very important in the Minister's life. Usually, those women have the last word in his household.

I welcome the decision by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) to halt the closure of Drumcree College, Portadown. We in the SDLP have argued for a sustained period that the school should remain open to serve the needs of its community. I have raised the issue with my colleagues on Craigavon Borough Council, and it has been raised at the council, where cross-party meetings were sought with the Minister to impress on him the need to keep the school open. I welcome the decision by CCMS, albeit at the eleventh hour, to rethink its position on the closure of Drumcree College. The school received a letter from CCMS on Friday 26 June indicating its intention to find a way to keep it operating, albeit within a different model. This U-turn on any plans to close Drumcree will be welcome news to the school and the wider community.

Although the school is small, it is unique and strategically important in the context of the community. Drumcree College must be recognised as a good school that deserves widespread support and financial assistance from the Department of Education. Only in the past few weeks, the school learned of its all-Ireland UNESCO award for an environmental project. Yesterday, we had the privilege of meeting young Ellie Delaney, an attendee at the learning support unit who has raised over

£4,800 for Headway Trust and the Rainbow Child Foundation. There is great pastoral care and community engagement as well as academic achievement in the field of maths, I believe, and a UK award in recent months. I asked the Minister of Education on 31 May to provide me with his assessment of the consultation process on the future of Drumcree College. In response to this question, the Minister informed me that CCMS had responsibility in the first instance to manage provision in the maintained schools estate and bring forward proposals to the Department. As the process for Drumcree College was still at the initial consultation stage, he was not able to make any assessment of the process.

Over the past number of months, I have been deeply concerned at the attitude of CCMS, operating under the policy direction of the Minister of Education, who was refusing to engage with the board of governors, staff and parents associated with the college. I have received correspondence from many teachers at Drumcree College expressing their grave concern at the possible closure of the school. Teachers have told me of their fear that pupils would not receive the quality of teaching and learning they deserved in other schools in the area — not due to the efforts of those schools, however, but simply as a result of oversubscribed classes. Such oversubscription would require additional funds from the Department in order to meet the needs of the children in the other schools in the area, namely St Catherine's and St Patrick's.

The Minister has set out his key objectives as raising standards, targeting social need and building a network of strong, sustainable schools. Drumcree College provides key facilities to support its young people, including a full-time counsellor and learning mentor to engage students and develop their ambition and skills to contribute to the local economy. The removal of these services would create a state of flux in this socio-economically deprived community and rob these children of a good standard of education and support.

I am told by many in the teaching community that CCMS has not provided the level of support necessary. No statement was issued encouraging students to attend Drumcree College, and this action would have lessened the fear of parents and guardians. The Minister refers to the need to take decisions based on independent advice, yet he chooses to ignore two separate consultations for closure carried out on Drumcree College, both supporting Catholic education in Portadown. CCMS also ignored this.

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

This debate provides an opportunity for this House to hear from the Minister as to how this very welcome U-turn came about and provide us with the detail of the new plans he will put in place to support the college going forward. I welcome the Minister's recent statement recognising that small schools can be of strategic importance to local communities and deserve to be adequately resourced in order to meet the needs of their children. I call on the Minister, following the recognition of the importance of this school, to pledge to this House that he will do everything in his power to keep it open and functioning to meet the needs of its local community, and that, in the future, he will not be so ready to create a fearful environment for parents, pupils and staff by treating an unfounded closure.

Mr Moutray: I congratulate Mrs Kelly on securing the debate this afternoon. I support her in the sentiments that she has extended. Drumcree College has served the community in which it is based very well for many years. It is recognised as the only post-primary school in the maintained sector in Portadown. It must also be noted that, if Drumcree College were to close, this would have an impact on the local community, not only educationally but also economically in that once again, people would be forced to send their children outside Craigavon to other places for their education, and that would have a very negative impact on the community.

In my role as mayor of Craigavon in 2010-11, I visited Drumcree College and was tremendously impressed by Mr Bullock, his staff and the children who were in attendance. I received a very warm welcome and I came into a school that was bright and happy. I think I was there on a European day or something like that, and I had a great experience and went away feeling that this was an educational establishment that was working. We must remember that the area of Portadown in which it is located has had many problems over the years, and Drumcree College, as far as I was concerned, was a beacon of light in that area in many times that were very dark.

I pay special tribute to the learning support unit in Drumcree. I also met Ellie Delaney when she was up here yesterday. I was delighted to meet her and some other people from the school. That unit in the college does some excellent work in preparing young people for later life. I looked on the internet earlier today at the skills areas that they receive training in. Among them are information and

communication technology (ICT), horticulture, media training and other skills. All those things are so important in training young people as they go through school and into work.

At the end of the day, I hope that the decision not to close the school will be stood by in the years ahead. It is envisaged that population numbers will increase significantly from 2015 on. There will be demand for Drumcree College in the days that lie ahead. I wish the school all the very best. I am pleased that I have had the opportunity to speak in this debate.

Mr Gardiner: First, let me record my congratulations to Mrs Dolores Kelly, who has done so much to fight the corner of Drumcree College in Portadown. She deserves praise for her persistence and hard work.

The whole state of education is in flux after 15 years' tenure of the education Ministry by Sinn Féin. Where it found peace, it has brought about conflict, uncertainty and discord. Nowhere is that more true than in my constituency of Upper Bann. Not only was Drumcree threatened with closure — hopefully, that has been reversed — but the Dickson plan, the mainstay of education in north Armagh for the past 40 years, is under direct threat. The thing that concerns me most about education change sponsored by Sinn Féin is the loss of opportunity that it represents for different groups of young people. In the case of Drumcree, it would have been a loss to children from a socially deprived background. In the case of the destruction of the Dickson plan, it will be a loss of two of the Province's best grammar schools, serving children from broadly pro-unionist backgrounds.

The Education Minister's plan to dismantle the Dickson plan in north Armagh is, I believe, the latest move in the cultural war that Sinn Féin is waging against unionism. Just as Drumcree was a vehicle to address social deprivation and educational disadvantage at the very place where that disadvantage and deprivation was happening, the closure of the two successful grammar schools in Lurgan and Portadown will see the shutting off of the life chances for a whole generation of children from broadly pro-unionist backgrounds. I believe that Sinn Féin wants to turn them into a sort of underclass and to shut down their life chances. It is not just the policy of Sinn Féin that I object to, but the way in which it is implementing it. It does not build up; it pulls down. It does not reinforce; it undermines. It should be building on the excellence that already exists in the system, not trying to destroy it. The principle that should guide educational change should be to retain

what is working well in the system and build up the parts of the system that are not. Let us hope that the revisiting of the Drumcree decision is a sign that things will be changing.

Mr Anderson: I, too, congratulate Mrs Kelly on securing the debate today. From the very outset, I thought that I was in the wrong debate; I thought that I was a couple of weeks behind, when we were hearing about the Dickson plan. I welcome Mr Gardiner coming late in the day to discuss the Dickson plan and lending us his support. I appreciate that that is now moving forward. Perhaps we will get fewer mixed messages coming from the representatives in Upper Bann on the Dickson plan than those that we heard in the past. Hopefully, we can take that forward.

For the second time in a few days, we are having a debate on the provision of education in Upper Bann, specifically in the Craigavon area. Two weeks ago, it was the Dickson plan in the controlled sector in Craigavon, and, today, it is Drumcree College in Portadown, which, of course, is in the maintained sector.

3.45 pm

We have heard some of the facts and issues about Drumcree College in the debate, and it is worth noting that Drumcree College is the only post-primary school in the Catholic maintained sector in the Portadown area. If it were to close, pupils who want an education in a Catholic school would have to travel as far away as Armagh, Keady and maybe beyond.

The Education Minister, Mr O'Dowd, is an MLA for Upper Bann, and I am aware that Sinn Féin councillors in the area have expressed regret at the uncertainty surrounding the future of the college. I would, therefore, be interested to hear exactly what the Minister and his party are doing to support the college in its campaign to remain open.

The Minister, when speaking generally about school closures, has said that it is not just a numbers game, and I agree with him. As I said previously, many different criteria need to be taken into account when deciding the future of schools.

Drumcree College is a good school. I know it well because I live quite close to it. It is a well-established school that produces excellent academic results. It provides staff and pupils with a happy educational environment. It has high standards that it seeks to maintain. I believe that the school's mission statement is:

"to provide an excellent education for all".

The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) has earmarked Drumcree College for closure for some time, and this ongoing uncertainty has not been good for stability or the morale of the school. No one would disagree that the school has suffered from underinvestment and a declining enrolment. However, that really ought to have been addressed long before now.

In April 2009, the Minister's predecessor, Caitríona Ruane, launched the policy initiative Every School a Good School, which was designed to improve outcomes for pupils and young people. Few would disagree with that. Why then can Drumcree College not be given a chance to fulfill its potential? As I said, it is a good school, and given help, support and a clear vision for the future, there is no reason why it should not be an excellent educational asset for that area.

The uncertainty about the future of the college has led to the inevitable knock-on effect of making it difficult for it to attract new pupils, and it has certainly suffered from falling enrolments. However, even with that uncertainty, enrolments have increased, albeit slightly, which is significant in itself. As Yvonne Sterritt, a community worker in the Ballyoran area and a member of the group campaigning to keep the school open, said, the numbers were:

"evidence of a resounding voice from within the area which supports the continuance of Drumcree College."

CCMS has given the college a reprieve, and it will be open in the new academic year starting in September. I am pleased about that, but it is just another stay of execution. We need clarity and a sense of direction. The uncertainty has dragged on for far too long.

Like others, I welcome the debate and hope that a resolution can be found for the school. It is needed and much required in that area. I hope that that resolution comes about quickly.

Mrs Dobson: I also congratulate Mrs Kelly on securing this timely Adjournment debate. It is timely because it gives the House an opportunity, once again, to discuss education in our constituency of Upper Bann.

As Mr Anderson mentioned, the debate comes less than a week after the divisive betrayal of public opinion that was shown by SELB in

voting for option A, which will effectively end the Dickson plan. CCMS's earlier decision to announce the closure of Drumcree College has equally angered communities in Portadown. However, its recent announcement of a pause in the consultation is to be welcomed.

At the very heart of this debate is the provision of quality local services for local people. The mission statement of Drumcree College is:

"to provide an excellent education for all".

If only that statement applied to SELB, CCMS and, indeed, the Department.

Last July, it was reported by SELB that the number of pupils putting Drumcree College as their first preference had risen, despite the school being earmarked for closure. That raised, once again, as in the case of small rural primary schools, the very real danger of self-fulfilling prophecies. The public hear that a school may close, vote with their feet and, unwittingly, the fate of the school is sealed. The longer uncertainty remains, the more that danger increases. However, having said that, I wish to commend those from the community who have campaigned to keep the college open. They can claim credit for that modest rise in the number of pupils who chose the college as their preference last year.

I noted with interest last week that the Minister's counterpart in Wales, Leighton Andrews, resigned because he was seen as trying to keep a school open in his constituency. There is no danger of that happening here. Mr Andrews apparently lost the confidence of the Welsh First Minister. Perhaps our own First Minister will consider making a similar gesture, given the politically motivated actions taken over the future of the Dickson plan. If trying to keep a school open in the Minister's constituency is a matter for the ministerial code in Wales, surely the threat hanging over the future of a school, or, indeed, a Minister intent on ending an entire education system, should equally come under the same scrutiny here.

The Minister is happy to hide his dogmatic party politics behind CCMS on Drumcree College and SELB on the Dickson plan. They provide convenient camouflage and cover for a Minister intent on continuing to ride roughshod over public opinion. Communities in Portadown support the retention of Drumcree College. That is backed up by almost 700 responses to the SELB's area-planning process. In SELB's own words:

"A majority of respondents commented that options other than closure should have been presented for consultation."

In the responses, it is pointed out that Drumcree College, like many schools, plays a central role in the community. The Drumcree Community Trust questioned whether the impact of the proposed closure on the community had been properly assessed. That is especially important, as Mrs Kelly highlighted, because a substantial part of the catchment area of the college lies within the north-west Portadown neighbourhood renewal area. The Minister will be well aware of the level of DSD-funded projects that have been conducted in recent years at schools within those areas. Communities are benefiting from the high level of investment in the future of their children. I, therefore, urge the Minister not to remove local post-primary provision. That would force children to travel far from their homes and would be potentially damaging in the long term to our local communities.

In saying that, I welcome the pause that CCMS has recently put on the process, and again urge SELB to take similar action in its area-planning proposals. The majority support the retention of Drumcree College. Majority support is something that Drumcree College and the Dickson plan have in common, but the Minister must stop and listen to the public before making decisions. I urge him to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Mervyn Storey.

Mr Storey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister stood up; he thought that he was Mervyn Storey. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that that is a nightmare that he will try to get over in the next few hours.

I thank you for calling me, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I apologise to Mrs Kelly for not being present to hear her comments at the commencement of the debate. I congratulate her for securing the debate at a timely period, not only for Drumcree College but for education generally in the Craigavon area.

I am Chair of the Education Committee, and I always like to support Members when an education issue is being debated. I have tried, as consistently as I can, to be present on most occasions because I do not see it as me just trying to fill time, rather it is my responsibility as an elected representative who has been given an important role in the Assembly. I also want to commend my colleagues from the area and to support them when such debates take place.

This afternoon, we are at another point when people will use the debate for other reasons. There are others who are using this debate, all of a sudden six months later, to extol the virtues of the Dickson plan, even though they had been deathly silent for a long time. Some of them could neither spell Dickson nor describe what a controlled school was because their domain was always in other places. However, we welcome conversions, and we welcome those who now, all of a sudden, see the merit in what we have been saying for some considerable time.

The focus of this debate has to be on Drumcree College and on what CCMS has been doing about the school. I thank the Member who supplied me with the correspondence that came yesterday from CCMS. I was absolutely astounded to read that an organisation that is tasked with being the voice and the champion of the maintained sector has, all of a sudden, tried to use the Minister as a cloak of convenience

There is no one happier than I am, when necessary, to give the Minister a metaphorical doing-over in this House. He is bigger than me, so I could not do it physically. *[Laughter.]* Nevertheless, organisations have to take responsibility for their own patch. I would like to know when CCMS has been a help to Drumcree College other than in its comments, in which it says:

"As a consequence, CCMS now proposes to pause consultation on the closure."

What message does that send out to the staff? What message does that send out to the community? What message does that send out to the pupils? It says that all you are is a part of a process, even though we know about the contribution that Drumcree College has made to its community and, I believe, to the wider community. Let us not try to narrow this down or suggest that this is, somehow, an issue that benefits just the Catholic community in the area. Drumcree College benefits the entire community in the way in which it goes about its job. If we really want to see progress in the Craigavon area, CCMS should step up to the plate by having shared provision in that area rather than doing what it has done to date, which, to benefit its own agendas, is to run away from the Dickson plan and to try to dismantle a process that has been there for many years.

I will place on record in the House this evening my support for the comments that have been

made in the debate. I apologise again to Mrs Kelly for not being here at the start of the debate. I trust that the pause in the consultation will be beneficial to the school and that it will not further compound the problems, difficulties and challenges that the pupils of Drumcree College and their parents face but that it will give them an opportunity to ensure that the school is there for those young people who will most benefit as a result of the education that they receive in that establishment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I now call the Minister of Education, Mr John O'Dowd, to respond to the debate. *[Laughter.]*

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to debate and outline some of the facts about Drumcree College, even though I know that the facts sometimes get in the road of a good argument.

First, I want to put on record that I have never ignored the views of or refused to engage with the board of governors of Drumcree College, the pupils and their parents or, indeed, the SDLP on the matter.

Let us look at the history of the proposal. Throughout her speech, in fairness to her, Mrs Kelly outlined the relationships in this matter, as well as my role and that of my Department and CCMS. First and foremost, it is legally the role of CCMS to decide the future of Drumcree College. I cannot legally interfere in the role of CCMS. I will come on to Mrs Dobson's comments about what happened in Wales later.

Regardless of whether the school is in my constituency, under various pieces of legislation, I have a legal duty as Minister to follow the proper procedures. CCMS has, through the post-primary Catholic review and the post-primary area plans, proposed the closure of Drumcree College. That, of course, caused concern in the community in Portadown but particularly among the staff of Drumcree College and the pupils and their parents. It has to be put on the record that there are sufficient pupil numbers in the Catholic sector in Portadown to keep Drumcree College open. The vast majority of parents, over many years, have decided to send their children elsewhere. Some of that was to do with the conflict around the Drumcree parading disputes and the atmosphere around Portadown at that time, while some of it was to do with how the amalgamation between the two former schools was managed — staff relationships, and so on — at that time. Parents made a conscious

decision. Mrs Kelly stood in the Chamber last week and defended parental choice. She defended the right of parents to decide what school their children attend. Is she seriously suggesting that I stop parental choice because it suits her in this political context? I cannot stop it.

4.00 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No. I cannot stop parents deciding to send their children out of Portadown to Armagh, Dungannon, Lurgan or Craigavon. I have no legal authority to do so, nor do I wish to have legal authority to do so.

Members across the Chamber last week supported academic selection as the best thing since sliced bread. The consensus among them was that it is the best invention ever in education and that we are so lucky to have it. Some parents decide to send their children outside Portadown, past Drumcree, up the Moy Road, up the Armagh Road and into Lurgan for academically selective education based on the myth that the education is in some way different or better. Members of all the other parties in the Chamber last week stood up and defended academic selection, but they now realise the impact that their policy has on local schools. One of the impacts on Drumcree College has been to create the myth that grammar schools provide a different type of education from non-selective schools. That is not true, and it is not a view supported by me, but it is one that is supported by every other party in the Chamber.

Parties quite rightly examine my policies and the impact that they have on schools, but they need to examine their own policies and their impact on schools, because the thing that is having the most detrimental impact on Drumcree College is the myth that schools outside it provide a different and better education.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No.

It is not true. They all teach the same curriculum and have the responsibility to provide 24 to 27 subjects.

Let us look at where we are with Drumcree College. CCMS in the past number of days has said that it is going to pause its proposal to close the school. Although I welcome that decision, Mr Storey has a point. The pupils,

parents and teachers who attend and support Drumcree College and the north-west community in Portadown need certainty; they need to know what is happening with Drumcree College. I as Minister cannot confirm what is happening with Drumcree College until I get a firm proposal from CCMS. We need a firm proposal. CCMS talks about providing alternative post-primary provision on the site. Let us see what that looks like and let us give certainty to those who wish to have continued education at Drumcree College.

An Adjournment debate secured by Mrs Kelly titled "Proposed Closure of Drumcree College" does not give any certainty to the college or to parents and pupils. A more appropriate title for the debate could have been "The Future of Drumcree College" or "Support for Drumcree College". What does it say to the community in Portadown when Mrs Kelly tables a topic for the Adjournment debate titled, "Proposed Closure of Drumcree College"? There is no proposed closure of Drumcree College.

Mr Anderson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: No, you have all had your opportunity.

It was mentioned in CCMS documents, but there is no proposal for the closure of Drumcree College.

Perhaps Mrs Kelly wants to come in at this point, because I am not sure which two consultations I ignored about Drumcree College. You referred to that in your speech, so perhaps you would like to elaborate.

Mrs D Kelly: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. He knows quite well that when I tabled the topic for debate, Drumcree College was being proposed for closure and that that was the basis for the consultation. There were consultations earlier this year, and this is the second consultation on Drumcree College. Minister, I tabled a question to you asking you, and I think that the school asked you — I am sure that you will correct me if I am wrong — to consider giving it a five-year breathing space so that it could come forward with a development proposal. You refused to do so.

Mr O'Dowd: Mrs Kelly, you either refuse to understand the system or you continue to ask the question because the answer does not suit you.

I have no legal authority — no legal authority — to interfere in the role of CCMS. I have no legal

authority to tell any school that I will give it five years before a development proposal comes forward. The only body that can do that in this case is CCMS. The only body that can give Drumcree College a five-year stay of execution from a development proposal is CCMS. Let me say it again: I have no legal authority to do so. It may not suit your political agenda for me to give you that answer.

Mr Anderson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just give me one moment.

I suspect that although many in Portadown are delighted that CCMS has come forward with its proposal today, Mrs Kelly is very disappointed, because she was building a wee political campaign for herself that was not in the interests of education but was in the interests of Mrs Kelly.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for giving way. He says that he has no legal authority to bring this forward. Minister, take off your ministerial cap and tell us this: do you, as an MLA for Upper Bann, support keeping Drumcree College open?

Mr O'Dowd: When you take up a ministerial post, you also take on a code of conduct and a ministerial code. Under that ministerial code, you say that you will serve all the people of the North. That is where my ministerial responsibilities come into play. If I were to make alternative views known or treat Drumcree College differently than any school outside my constituency, Members on all the other Benches would, quite rightly, call for my resignation. Indeed, Mrs Dobson said today that the First Minister should perhaps consider whether he has confidence in me. I suspect that I can answer that question, but the First Minister does not appoint me. The deputy First Minister appoints me, and I will let him answer that question.

I have a duty, which I take very seriously, to serve all the people of the North. I will not treat schools in my constituency any differently from those in any other constituency. If I do not believe that my policy is right, I withdraw my policy. However, I believe that the policy is right. I believe that it is there to protect the educational well-being of all our young people, uncomfortable though that may be for me at times as an MLA or as an individual. I cannot let my heart rule my head on this matter.

As I said, I welcome the fact that CCMS has brought forward further clarification today, but it

is long past the time that pupils, parents, teachers and those in the Portadown community who support Drumcree College had certainty. I urge CCMS to bring forward a definitive proposal on the way forward for that college, for the sake of everyone.

Adjourned at 4.08 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

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

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Potential Trust Procurement Issues

Published at noon on Tuesday 2 July 2013

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): This Statement draws to the Assembly's attention audit investigations arising from information reported by whistle-blowers about potential malpractice in the procurement and management of building maintenance in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Assurance and accountability is fundamental as it is important to know that ALBs are complying with relevant guidance and regulations. One area which can be particularly challenging is that of procurement given the wide range of local, national and European legislation, regulations and guidance. Adherence to these requirements is essential if we are to demonstrate value for money for Health and Social Care and ensure equitable treatment to all our suppliers and contractors. I expect nothing less from those in my Department and its Arms Length Bodies.

However within the Northern Health and Social Care Trust whistleblowing allegations have been made of procurement and potential contract management malpractice within the estates function, alongside others relating to managerial issues. Under my Department's oversight, BSO Internal Audit and investigation specialists are investigating these allegations.

Although a report has not yet been finalised, it is apparent that there are a number of procurement control weaknesses in the Trust's Estates function and investigations are still ongoing. In this respect, external audit, as part of their audit on the 2012/13 Annual Accounts, have identified £860,000 of payments in respect of Measured Day Term Contracts (MDTC), which may be potentially irregular due to procurement issues. The Trust has already moved to take some corrective action and

Health Estates Investment Group, within my Department, will also undertake a series of compliance checks across all Trusts and further audits are planned for 2013.

My Department is ensuring that all allegations are investigated with appropriate rigour to ensure that when any necessary improvements have been made, the public can have full confidence in NHSCT Estates procurement practices.

It is appropriate and important that where anyone has information about abuse of public money this is brought to light so that the specific issues can be resolved, appropriate lessons learned, and public confidence restored. Where wrongdoing has occurred it must be addressed, with a proportionate and appropriate response.

I will provide further information to the Assembly following completion of all the investigations.

Social Development

2013 Annual Report on the Concordat between the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government

Published at 3.00 pm on Tuesday 2 July 2013

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): As you are aware, the Concordat between the Voluntary and Community Sector and the Northern Ireland Government included an undertaking to report annually to the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly on issues impacting on the Sector. In accordance with the principles contained within the Concordat, I wish to present Assembly colleagues with the second report on the implementation of the Concordat. This report includes detail on issues impacting the Voluntary and Community Sector, the progress made against selected commitments contained within the Concordat and progress made against recommendations made by the Public Accounts Committee in their report 'Creating Effective Partnerships between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector'.

The Concordat, which is the formal agreement between this Assembly and the Voluntary and Community Sector, is the means by which we work together as social partners with the Sector

to create more responsive and people-centred public services and since its launch in 2011, work has been ongoing to create the circumstances where these outcomes can be realised.

This pledge by government and the sector committing to work together is underpinned by the establishment and implementation of an agreed set of commitments. The report presented today demonstrates how serious this commitment has been taken and how much can be achieved when we work together.

This government has long recognised and valued the contribution the Voluntary and Community Sector makes to the social, economic, environmental, political, and cultural life of Northern Ireland and recognises and supports the independence of the Sector and its right to campaign within the law and to comment on and, where appropriate, challenge government policy.

This is where the Concordat agreement has been pivotal in placing the Sector on an equal footing with the public sector bodies it interacts with on a daily basis and in giving the Sector a voice that can now be clearly heard. The Concordat, as a written agreement, has been transformed into a living document with the power to build capacity and the capability to make more responsive and people centred public services by harnessing the expertise available to us.

This is the second report on the Concordat from the Joint Forum and this is what makes the progress on the commitments all the more significant. The report demonstrates that the Joint Forum has tackled what have previously been considered difficult issues. An example of the tangible progress made includes the recent issue of a report on 'Addressing Bureaucracy'. In the last year real progress has been made in developing pragmatic ways to reduce bureaucracy in the funding process. This work will go some way towards reducing the bureaucratic burden on the Sector.

Progress has also been made in the area of policy development so that all significant stakeholders are involved in the process as early as possible so that the resultant policy will be fit for purpose. The Joint Forum has also provided a platform for Government Departments to communicate with the sector on key issues. Recent meetings have included presentations on the Reform of Local Government and Welfare Reform programmes.

New and existing public sector and voluntary and community sector working relationships have been established and strengthened and strong links have been forged with other forums with similar professional interests with an exchange of membership.

I am very pleased to commend this report to my Executive and Assembly colleagues and to endorse the progress made over the past year. The implementation of the Concordat commitments and the identification and resolution of issues affecting the Voluntary and Community Sector can only assist Government and Voluntary and Community Sector partnership working, which aims to better serve the people of Northern Ireland.

A copy of the report has been published on the DSD website and can be accessed from http://www.dsdni.gov.uk/index/voluntary_and_community/vc-publications.htm



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