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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 November 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Suspension of Standing Order 20(1)

Mr Swann: I beg to move

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 6 November 2012.

Mr Speaker: Before I move to the Question, I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Order 20(1) be suspended for 6 November 2012.

Mr Speaker: As there are Ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Mr Speaker, in compliance with Section 52C(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, we wish to make the following statement on the fifteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in plenary format, which was held in Armagh on Friday 2 November 2012. The Executive Ministers who attended the meeting have approved this report, and we make it on their behalf.

Our delegation was led by the First Minister, Peter Robinson, and me. In addition, the following Executive Ministers were in attendance: Minister Attwood; Minister Farry; Minister Foster; Minister O'Dowd; Minister O'Neill; Minister Poots; Minister Wilson; junior Minister McCann; and junior Minister Bell.

The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD. The following Irish Government Ministers were also in attendance: the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Eamon Gilmore; Minister Noonan; Minister Quinn; Minister Bruton; Minister Burton; Minister Deenihan; Minister Reilly; Minister Varadkar; and Minister of State McEntee.

Ministers extended their sympathies to the family of David Black, who was brutally murdered on his way to work last Thursday, and condemned those who carried out this atrocity. Ministers reaffirmed their determination that actions such as this will not be allowed to drag us back to the past.

The Council discussed the economic challenges being faced in each jurisdiction and the work being undertaken to address the global economic crisis. Ministers specifically discussed challenges in the banking sector, the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), corporation tax and the benefits of working together to build trade links with economies

such as China's. Ministers also discussed the importance of tourism to both economies and recognised the importance of maximising the benefits of major initiatives such as the World Police and Fire Games, the City of Culture celebrations and "The Gathering" 2013. Farm safety was also discussed, and Ministers expressed their sympathies to everyone who has lost loved ones in farm-related accidents.

There was a discussion on the St Andrews Agreement review, and it was agreed that senior officials would meet and bring forward proposals before the end of the year. Ministers reiterated their commitment to the north-west region and noted that further discussions would take place on the north-west gateway initiative.

Ministers also discussed Ireland's presidency of the EU during the first half of 2013. They noted the priorities for the presidency term and that a full programme of events is planned. The Council noted that a central theme of the Irish presidency will be to improve the European Union's global competitiveness, promote economic growth and create jobs. Those priorities will be reflected across all of Ireland's presidency programme. Also discussed was how the outcome of negotiations on the future financing of the EU through the multi-annual financial framework (MFF) will be critical for Europe's future economic development and competitiveness in vital areas, such as the reform of the common agricultural and fisheries policies.

The importance of engagement in the NSMC to maximise mutual benefit from the Irish EU presidency was recognised. It was noted that arrangements have been put in place to enable Irish Ministers to brief their Executive counterparts on presidency-related issues at NSMC meetings and that consideration is being given to joint participation by our Ministers at presidency-related events.

The Council noted the progress report that the NSMC joint secretaries prepared on the work of the North/South bodies. It also noted that 24 NSMC meetings had taken place so far this year. The Council also welcomed key developments, including that construction of the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin is to commence in 2013, with the unit being operational in 2016. The child protection steering group has developed a future work programme that is to be taken forward through five specific work streams. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) has been agreed on protecting the island of Ireland from exotic animal disease incursion, underlining the commitment to key

principles in the all-island animal health and welfare strategy.

The Council welcomed that a joint inspection of the Middletown Centre for Autism by the Education Departments concluded:

"The Centre is meeting very effectively the needs of the young people, their peers, parents and professionals and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained improvement."

At their meeting on 17 October, Education Ministers agreed to continue to support the efforts of both Administrations to ensure that the agreed expansion of the Middletown Centre for Autism is delivered as soon as possible.

Work has now commenced on the repatriation of illegally dumped waste at a further two sites in County Tyrone — at Seskinore and in Eskra, Clogher. Joint enforcement action to deal with illegal operators remains a priority for both Environment Ministers, and the Departments continue to target resources to that. A timetable of key milestones has been agreed to enable the necessary legislation to be put in place by the end of 2014 for the mutual recognition of penalty points across the Island.

InterTradeIreland created or sustained 115 jobs in the first half of this year against a full-year target of 150, and in the period June 2011 to July 2012, it facilitated the drawdown of €20 million from the seventh framework programme — FP7 — for 19 cross-border projects. InterTradeIreland is also running two new programmes — Challenge and Elevate — that are designed specifically to help small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to develop their innovative and exporting capabilities. Both programmes have generated considerable interest and strong initial returns.

Development on post-2013 territorial co-operation EU programmes has commenced, with several public consultations having been held already. The Food Safety Promotion Board's Stop the Spread obesity awareness campaign won the gold award in the healthcare sector at the 2012 an Post integrated direct marketing awards. The Council welcomed the Loughs Agency's significant contribution to the Clipper Round the World event and its preparations for the sea and trout angling events of the 2013 World Fire and Police Games.

The Ulster-Scots Agency is developing plans to promote and support Ulster-Scots haitlan areas with its aim to preserve, protect and

present Ulster-Scots heritage through geographical designations. Foras na Gaeilge provided a revised implementation plan for the review of core funding at the NSMC language meeting in July 2012. Final proposals will be brought to the next NSMC language meeting in December 2012.

The restoration of the Ulster canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne is progressing through the planning application process in both jurisdictions. An inter-agency group has been set up to examine all possible options to advance the project. Tourism Ireland is rolling out major promotional campaigns for "The Gathering" Ireland 2013 and the City of Culture 2013.

The NSMC noted the current position on a North/South consultative forum and agreed to review that issue at a future NSMC plenary sitting. Ministers welcomed the establishment of the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association and noted that it held its inaugural meeting in Dublin on 12 October 2012. Ministers noted that members of the Assembly and the Oireachtas had discussed the Ulster canal and child protection and agreed to meet again in April 2013. The Council approved a schedule of NSMC meetings proposed by the joint secretariat, including an NSMC plenary meeting in July 2013.

Mr Moutray: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. How does he see Northern Ireland benefiting as a result of the Irish Republic having the EU presidency?

Mr M McGuinness: From our meeting in Armagh on Friday, it is clear that the Irish Government are very anxious to have us as much involved in all of that as possible. They provided us with a useful update on their plans for the forthcoming EU presidency. As everybody knows, Ireland is hosting the EU presidency at a time when it is likely that decisions will be taken that will have a major impact on all of us. It is likely that decisions will be taken on future EU funding programmes and on the very important common agricultural policy. That gives us a unique opportunity to ensure that our opinions are communicated to those who will be making decisions, in a way that would not otherwise happen.

Informal council meetings will be held on various topics during the presidency, and we understand that some of our Ministers and senior officials will have the opportunity to attend those meetings, which will provide access to key decision-makers across the EU. We have also agreed that our Executive office

in Brussels will make space available to the Irish permanent representative for meetings and events. We welcome the arrangement whereby senior officials in the Civil Service receive regular briefings from their Irish government counterparts on the priorities associated with each EU presidency. We are also aware that some of our Ministers and senior officials are going to be invited to events, and that is to be welcomed. There is a very inclusive approach being taken, and given that all of that is to our mutual benefit, it is a very sensible arrangement.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the Minister for the update, and particularly mark the fact that Ministers at the North/South plenary offered their sympathy to the family of David Black on this particularly difficult day for that family. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I note that the deputy First Minister omitted the "UK" from the "UK City of Culture" when he was reading out his report. Perhaps he would like to put that right in a moment.

My question is with regard to InterTradelreland. The Minister is celebrating the fact that, halfway through the year, it is more than halfway to its target of 150 jobs created or sustained. Given that the budget of InterTradelreland is £9,822,000 per annum, making it £65,480 for each job created or sustained, does the deputy First Minister consider that to be good value for money?

10.45 am

Mr M McGuinness: InterTradelreland is good value for money. It has clearly been one of the great success stories of the North/South institutions. In the initial stages, when we did not have a world economic crisis, it was quite clear that there had been a very substantial increase in trade between North and South. Obviously, this very cruel world recession has impacted somewhat on North/South trade but, from its foundations, InterTradelreland has always shown itself to be a body that could deliver in a way that would be of mutual benefit to everyone in the business community, North and South.

As we go forward, we can learn from the experiences that we have been through. When InterTradelreland and the other bodies were established, we did not have a world economic crisis, but now that we have one, people will have to cut their cloth to meet their needs,

considering the very severe challenges that we all face in the time ahead.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Will he update us on the north-west gateway initiative?

Mr M McGuinness: We had a discussion about the north-west gateway initiative. Many people, particularly representatives from the north-west, understand that it is a very important piece of work. Maintaining the initiative's momentum is hugely important and, in order to do that, we agreed that officials should hold a meeting, which should take place early next year.

The north-west science park was not discussed at the meeting, but I am very pleased that the programme approvals for it have now been sought and obtained, and a letter of offer has been issued to the lead partner. It will be a welcome addition to the region that will help to strengthen our innovation infrastructure. Given current economic conditions, however, those benefits may not be realised immediately.

We have also had developments in the supply of new buses. The issue of trains and the rail link from Coleraine to Derry is very important. Although the A5 road project has been interrupted as a result of a judicial review, the money for that has been ring-fenced by our Administration, so there is no threat to that. There was some discussion of that matter at the meeting, and we were all conscious that, until the judicial review, it had been all systems go. Hopefully, that review can be concluded very shortly, and it is quite clear that the Department for Regional Development (DRD) is very focused on the need to proceed with that work. I understand that there is some concern about the delay, but DRD is going to robustly defend that action and has instructed senior counsel to take it forward as quickly as possible. As with all these matters, there is a risk of a delay.

Mike Nesbitt challenged me to use the term "UK" when describing the City of Culture project. That is the title that was awarded to the city, and different people in the city have different ways of expressing that, just as they have different ways of expressing the name of the city. The important thing is not to use it as a political point-scoring exercise, but to recognise that Derry, or as some citizens of the city choose to call it, Londonderry, has been awarded a unique opportunity to take forward a project that can effectively make that city the cultural capital of the north-west, with a great legacy. Hopefully, and more importantly than

anything else, it will increase the employment prospects of young people in the city. World-class events will be coming to the city and it will move forward, as it did for the bid, in a very united way.

I caution everyone in society to recognise that the whole issue of the City of Culture should not be made a political point-scoring exercise. There is a danger that some people can lapse into that, but the people who are charged with the responsibility of taking the City of Culture project forward in the city are very conscious of the need to ensure that it is a totally inclusive event and that everyone in the city feels comfortable and part of something that is going to be truly historic.

Mr Eastwood: The deputy First Minister has expressed very clearly his understanding of how important the City of Culture — the UK City of Culture or whatever people want to call it — is for the city of Derry. The legacy that that will have for our people will be very important for us all. Can he assure the House that NITB will make a similar marketing effort to that made on the 2012 Our Time Our Place campaign?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes. Everybody in our Government, Assembly and Executive understands the importance of the City of Culture and that there is a duty and a responsibility on all agencies to ensure that it is marketed in a way that will complement the great work that is taking place in the city as we move forward. I have confidence that people appreciate the opportunity that is there and appreciate that, for many in the north-west, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ensure that the city moves forward in a way that brings not just economic progress but a very real opportunity for the city to emerge as a very important cultural and economic hub in the future.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement and for the confirmation of how Ministers, North and South on the island of Ireland, are working together to build a shared and better future for people throughout our community. That stands in stark contrast to the futile and cowardly actions of the murderers of David Black. I note and welcome the united condemnation from Ministers throughout Ireland. Indeed, the President of Ireland has represented the sympathies of the entire people, which go to the Black family, especially today.

In relation to the practical efforts on the ground, is it possible for the deputy First Minister to

update the House on work to identify an all-island solution to children's heart surgery provision in Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: Everybody in the House knows that our Health Minister, Edwin Poots, is very focused on that issue. We know from the pressure that comes from families who are directly affected by the dangers to their children's lives that it is a critically important area of work. There was some discussion about that at the meeting. Minister Reilly and Minister Poots are very focused on the need to get a resolution to that issue as quickly as possible. I am absolutely satisfied that that is being taken forward with all haste.

In relation to the attitude at the meeting regarding the murder of David Black, it is very important to point out again that, in Armagh, we had present the political representatives of the people of Ireland, North and South. All the major political parties on this island have condemned the murder of David Black. It is very important to make the point that the people who murdered David Black do not speak for the people of Ireland. We, as the elected representatives — whether it is myself, Peter Robinson, Enda Kenny, Eamon Gilmore, Micheál Martin or the representatives and leaders of the other political parties in the Assembly — speak for the people of Ireland. We demand that these people — these idiots who wish to plunge us back to the past and who are committed to violence to overturn the democratically expressed wishes of the people, North and South, that we move forward in peace and in a way that sees increased sharing and co-operation between us — stop their activities and recognise the importance of weighing in behind the expressed will for peace and the views of the people of Ireland.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he give us any more detail on the discussions at the North/South Ministerial Council on the North/South inter-parliamentary forum?

Mr M McGuinness: The North/South inter-parliamentary forum has sprung to life. All credit is due to our Speaker, William Hay, and to the Ceann Comhairle, Seán Barrett, for the work that they engaged in to ensure that it moved forward. The first meeting of the parliamentary forum was held on 12 October. It discussed things such as the Ulster canal and child protection. More importantly, we all recognise that, without endangering anybody's political allegiances or aspirations, it makes sense to have politicians throughout this island

sitting down and discussing issues of real relevance. We can come up with ideas and suggestions that ensure that we are comprehensively dealing with issues that resonate throughout the island in a way that does not undermine anybody's allegiances. That is very important. The strengthening of such links is a good thing.

It is hugely important that we continue to give support to our Speaker and the Ceann Comhairle, express to them our deepest thanks and appreciation for their work in bringing this to fruition and wish both of them every success in the future. I am sure that all the political parties that are represented on this body will see its importance.

In many ways, it also sends a very important message to those who are committed to ongoing violence. Here we have political representatives from all the major political parties on this island prepared to sit down together in a spirit of dignity and respect to discuss real issues that can make a difference to people, North and South.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. He has mentioned a number of key strategic areas of work for the north-west. I welcome his mentioning the gateway initiative, the science park, the City of Culture and the radiotherapy unit.

Given Derry City FC's success on Sunday, was there any discussion of the game at the North/South ministerial meeting and what impact it would have, particularly the possible return of European football to Derry?

Mr M McGuinness: Funnily enough, it was mentioned at the meeting. It was mentioned in the context of the Taoiseach giving us a report that Paddy Power had extended his workforce and that he was there for the announcement. Given that the meeting took place prior to the final, I asked him whether he had asked what the odds were on Derry City winning the FAI Cup. There was a bit of a snigger from the other side of the table as if there was no hope. However, I pay tribute to Philip O'Doherty, chairman of Derry City, Declan Devine, the manager, Kevin Deery, the captain and all of the team. It was a great North/South occasion, with 16,000 fans there. There was a great spirit, and the FAI was absolutely fantastic.

Prior to going to Dublin for the game, I, along with the First Minister, was at another very

important all-island event in Casement Park for the very important Michaela Foundation. Great credit must go to the GAA and to Mickey Harte, John McAreavey and their families. It is obvious that they are much loved among every section of our community. What happened was a terrible tragedy. We have to recognise that sporting organisations, North and South, make an incredible contribution. We should also recognise the incredible contribution of the Northern footballers who got a fantastic draw against Portugal.

I am one of those people who believes that when young people go onto the pitch to play their sport, engage in training and inspire their communities, it is a very good thing. It does not matter who they represent, and we should resist the temptation to be critical of decisions that young people make about who they play for.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the deputy First Minister. The Narrow Water bridge is a very important strategic project for the south Down area. Was that discussed? We have the funding from Europe, but the project needs a firm commitment from the Irish Government and the Assembly.

Mr M McGuinness: We did have a brief discussion on the Narrow Water bridge project. I am very pleased that planning permission has been granted for the bridge on both sides of the border and that the project has been successful in its bid for funding, having been awarded €17.4 million. So, the Finance Departments, North and South, are in the lead on what is an ambitious project that will involve the construction of a 600 metre single-lane bridge.

I understand that, if everything progresses as planned, the bridge could be completed by 2015.

11.00 am

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a thug sé dúinn inniu. Will the Minister provide an update on the restoration of the Ulster canal from Clones to Upper Lough Erne?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, there was a presentation on the issue at the North/South interparliamentary forum, and the planning processes are up and running. I understand that, on the Cavan side of the border, it has been successfully concluded. There is still some work to do on this side. Everyone

realises, from a tourism point of view, that this is filled with all sorts of potential for us, particularly in the context not only of whatever construction jobs will be created by the project but of the prospects for utilising our waterways in a way that can bring employment to local communities.

Mr G Robinson: What plans are in place to control spending on North/South bodies?

Mr M McGuinness: We are all very conscious of living in a time of great economic hardship, and the responsibility and duty fall to the Minister of Finance in our Executive and the Minister for Finance in the South, Michael Noonan. Both have been charged by the North/South Ministerial Council to look at how we can utilise the funds available to us in a way that gives us the best value possible.

We are all conscious that enormous savings can be achieved through North/South co-operation and by working together. For example, Minister Quinn in the South and Minister O'Dowd in the North are looking at education in border areas, which impacts on people on both sides of the border and right across the community. We have had very progressive statements from Edwin Poots, our Minister of Health on how the new South West Acute Hospital in Fermanagh can be utilised for the treatment of people living not only in Fermanagh and the surrounding area in the North but in Cavan and Monaghan. All these opportunities are out there to ensure that we are as cost-effective as possible. Both Finance Ministers and, indeed, the entire ministerial team at the North/South Ministerial Council are very focused on ensuring that we utilise what are, at present, fairly meagre funds in the best way.

Mr Newton: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. He mentioned the drawdown of €20 million under the FP7 programme by InterTradelreland. Does he agree that there is a need to increase the level of drawdown under this programme for innovative-type programmes? Specifically, how might he encourage InterTradelreland to do so?

Mr M McGuinness: It is very important. The First Minister and I met Máire Geoghegan-Quinn in Brussels and emphasised the importance of ensuring that we draw down as much as we can. Máire Geoghegan-Quinn attended a conference here in, I think, the Titanic building, although I am subject to correction. In the early part of next year, there will be an opportunity for further meetings of

that nature. Therefore, it is crucial that InterTradelreland and, indeed, all our SMEs in the North understand the importance of engaging with Europe. We have put a big emphasis on that in the Executive. All our Departments are very focused on the need to ensure that they do as much as they can to increase the drawdown, at the same time as getting the message out to SMEs that they can increase their drawdown by increasing their contact and co-operation with the European Union.

Mr Spratt: I thank the deputy First Minister for his statement. Deputy First Minister, you mentioned the A5 project. The Committee has been informed that £10.7 million a month is going back into the centre, and you mentioned that it was going to be ring-fenced by the Executive. Does that mean that, after the judicial process has ended, the moneys that have gone back will be reinstated to the A5 project?

Mr M McGuinness: We are all hoping that the judicial review can be dealt with as quickly as possible, and, as I said, our Minister for Regional Development, Danny Kennedy, will defend our position robustly. I hope that on the other side of that, if we are successful — there is every expectation that we can be — we will move forward with the project. The First Minister, the Finance Minister and I have already had discussions, and we are absolutely satisfied that the funding for our contribution to the construction of the new roads from New Buildings to Strabane and from Omagh to Ballygawley will be there. The Finance Minister will keep a close eye on the project to ensure that it goes ahead and that there will be no threat whatsoever to the funding that has been allocated to it.

Schools: Putting Pupils First

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Le do chhead, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh ar na chéad chéimeanna eile don oideachas.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the next steps for education. Last autumn, I came to the Assembly with a challenging and necessary programme of actions under the heading of "Putting Pupils First: Shaping Our Future". I want to update Members on the progress made since then and to set out information on a further programme of work. That programme continues to put pupils first and is focused on improving the outcomes of our young people and, in doing so, on creating opportunity.

In "Shaping Our Future", I set out the challenges associated with a schools estate that was not well planned in the past and needed reshaping, reinvestment and realignment with local communities' educational needs. Since then, viability audits have been carried out to assess the educational, enrolment and financial position of every primary and post-primary school. The area planning exercise that I promised is under way. The consultation phase for post-primary plans concluded recently, and I expect to have the finalised plans on my desk shortly. The cross-border survey of education is also now under way, and it will examine how education is provided along the border corridor and whether there is scope to engage in joint planning of the respective schools estates in this area.

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

Although my departmental allocation is limited, major capital investment has been planned and announced after a transparent process of prioritisation. Money is being spent to deliver modern, fit-for-purpose schools that will be sustainable long into the future. At the same time, I have significantly increased and ring-fenced the investment in maintenance to £40 million this year to date. Importantly and perhaps for the first time, an increasingly mature and healthy debate is happening in communities across the North about the future planning of our schools estate.

Over the past year, we have delivered progress in other areas. We have reached agreement at the Executive on the next steps for special education. We have amended preschool admissions arrangements to remove the

July/August birthday anomaly. I will shortly announce revised proposals for the early years strategy. Sir Bob Salisbury is leading the review of the common funding scheme, and I look forward to receiving his report in the near future. We have, of course, also started the legislative journey towards the establishment of a new Education and Skills Authority that will have our young people and their needs at its core. We have also responded to the growing appetite for sharing in our education system, and I look forward to the recommendations from the shared education working group that Professor Paul Connolly is leading.

The Executive have rightly been considering their response to the challenging economic context that persists. The Programme for Government makes clear the priority that all Ministers attach to the economy. That priority recognises the immediate challenge of supporting economic recovery and the longer-term challenge of growing an economy that provides opportunities for all. It should be an economy that generates wealth equitably and ethically, can compete and win business and can create jobs and provide opportunity. We know, too, that an economy can succeed in the face of global competition only if its education system is performing well and its young people achieve to their full potential. We cannot, therefore, divorce what our children learn and how well they do at school from our economic future. For that reason, I have remained determined to ensure that our young people have access to a modern, relevant curriculum and to high-quality careers advice. That is why I commenced, as I said I would, the legislation that gives effect to the entitlement framework. Schools are now planning with certainty to ensure the delivery of a range of courses that will respond to the interests of pupils and the needs of our economy. Parents and young people can be assured that there will be a broader curriculum available from September 2013. They should not hesitate to ask how their school is planning to meet the requirements of the entitlement framework.

Linked to the entitlement framework, of course, is the awarding of qualifications. As Members know, I have announced a review of our qualifications to ensure that they continue to be credible, portable and tailored to our needs. I am also determined to retain a clear and unapologetic focus on raising educational standards, a focus that is at the heart of my Department's corporate plan for 2012-15, which will also be published this week.

On 17 October, the chief inspector of the Department's Education and Training

Inspectorate launched her biennial report on the state of our education system. Through its independent reporting of the strengths and areas for improvement in our schools and youth provision, the inspectorate makes a key contribution to raising standards. It acts as a catalyst for improvement. In the past year, 81% of schools with follow-up inspections had improved by at least one performance level. The report paints an improving picture in our primary schools, showing that the revised curriculum has bedded in well and is making a difference, that Key Stage 2 outcomes for pupils in literacy and numeracy continue to improve and that the overall quality of provision was good or better in four fifths of primary schools inspected.

I acknowledge the dedication of our primary schools and the improvement that has been delivered, but too many children are not well served. One in five of our pupils is not at the expected level of literacy and numeracy by the time they leave primary school. The report highlights that leadership and management in just over 20% of the primary schools inspected need to be improved. We need to tackle these problems, not tolerate them.

Our post-primary schools face even more complex challenges. The Assembly knows my views on academic selection well. It knows that persisting with a two-tier model of provision or, rather, overprovision at post-primary level creates the greatest challenges for the schools that serve our poorest communities and the children who stand to benefit most from a great education and face the greatest barriers to fulfilling their potential. That reality is not the fault of our schools, yet it is our non-selective post-primary schools that are often left to deal with the consequences. Unless we tackle the structural deficiencies in post-primary provision, we will not make the progress that we need to make. In the meantime, I will take action to address the issues that the chief inspector's report highlights, issues that include the indefensible gap in attainment at GCSE between our least and most affluent pupils and underachievement among boys and girls and among Protestant working-class children and their Catholic working-class neighbours.

The chief inspector tells us that inspections and follow-up inspections of post-primary schools resulted in overall effectiveness being evaluated as good or better in 59% of schools. It is right that we pay tribute to the staff and governors in those schools, but the other side of that statistic gives me and must give the Assembly real cause for concern. It tells us that provision was not good enough in 41% of the

post-primary schools inspected. The report also tells us that curriculum provision could be better in 33% of post-primary schools and that leadership and management need to improve in 39% of the schools inspected. It finds that in 20% of post-primary schools inspected — one in five — the leadership of the principal was less than satisfactory.

When the report looks at the English and maths departments in post-primary schools, we see that the leadership is good or better in over 70% of English departments but in just over 50% of maths departments. We know how central good maths teaching is, yet in almost half of the post-primary maths departments inspected, leadership and management needs to improve.

There must be a clear and sustained response to this report. It highlights the need to move beyond academic selection. While we work to achieve that in the short term, the report makes clear the need for other action that I, as Minister, propose to take.

11.15 am

It is very clear from the chief inspector's report and from wider local and international evidence that effective leadership and high-quality teaching are central to delivering improvement. The flexibility to teach in a way that best meets the needs of pupils holds no fear for them, nor does being held accountable for the outcomes their pupils achieve. We have many great teachers in our schools, but we need to do more. We need to do more to acknowledge great teachers and to develop more of them, and, yes, we need to do more to challenge and support those who are not as effective as they should be. For that reason, I have already announced action to enhance the professional standing of teachers here. I propose to bring before the Assembly legislation to strengthen the role of the General Teaching Council as the professional body in supporting teachers and in upholding the highest professional standards. We will also support the continuing professional development of teachers through a new strategy for teacher education that will focus on attracting the right people into teaching and then on how to support them as they prepare to become teachers and as they go through their professional career. I also intend that ESA will have a professional support service of the highest quality. It will be responsive to the needs of teachers, modern in its outlook and dedicated in its commitment to helping teachers help pupils. In the interim, I have tasked my officials with taking action to ensure that the

current structures deliver effectively for teachers.

I turn now to leadership. We know that great teachers can flourish only when they are supported in schools by great leaders. Therefore, we need to take a fresh look at how we develop and support our school leaders — our principals and vice-principals — and others in leadership positions in schools.

In response to the chief inspector's finding that our leadership programmes are fragmented and in need of updating, I will ensure the development and delivery of coherent, modern, fit-for-purpose leadership programmes that reflect the challenges of education in the 21st century. I want those programmes to focus on developing leaders who lead effectively not only within their school but beyond the school gates, leaders who work in alliance with their peers to meet the educational needs of all young people in their area.

I am also convinced that we need to reinvigorate the negotiating machinery that deals with principals' and teachers' pay and conditions of service. It is simply too complex and too slow in responding to the changing needs of pupils and of teachers. For example, should we not have the flexibility to reward principals on the basis not of the number of pupils in their school but of the size of the challenges they face and their success in overcoming those challenges? I suggest that leadership challenges in taking over an underperforming school with low aspirations and falling numbers may be far greater than those involved in leading a school with stable enrolment and a strong track record of delivering education.

I also want to see more mobility in the profession. We have teachers and principals who have not experienced teaching outside their own school. They have worked their entire career in one place. I ask this question: can such a system really provide the professional challenges that teachers and principals want and need? We need to do more to make sure that the recruitment process for principals values breadth of experience, including employment outside the school. I want to see a situation where promotion to principal is frequently not the last career move for a teacher but the first career move for an education leader.

We also need to learn from other countries. We already benchmark our 15-year-olds in reading, maths and science through the programme for international student assessment (PISA)

survey. Next month, following our participation in two major international surveys — the trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS), which looks at maths and science, and the progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS), which looks at reading — we will be able to establish for the first time how our primary system compares with those in other countries. That will allow us to see how we shape up against the best in the world.

I also want to announce to the Assembly that, as part of our work to learn from the best, the North will participate in a major review by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of how assessment and evaluation systems deliver improvements for pupils. Our involvement will help others learn from our experience. Importantly, it will also help us to learn from others. It will involve an in-depth country review of our education system carried out by independent experts from other OECD countries. This is an exciting development that will provide valuable information to help us improve further our education system. It seems right, after all, that, if we expect our schools to be inspected and evaluated and to respond with action to build on strengths and address areas for improvement, we should expect to subject our system as a whole to similar scrutiny with the same objective: learning and improving. I look forward to welcoming the OECD expert team in the new year and hope that they will have an opportunity to talk not just to teachers, pupils, principals and governors but to some of our politicians and policy advisers.

I have talked about schools. I have talked about teaching and leadership. In focusing on leadership, I want to do more to support governors, who give valuable leadership to our schools in a voluntary capacity. My Department will therefore ensure the creation of a dedicated governor support service. That service will not only provide training, advice and support but will develop greater opportunities for governors to network, share experience and become a stronger, collective voice in our education system. Last autumn, I asked the inspectorate to broaden and strengthen the existing evaluation of the effectiveness of boards of governors. That is now being trialled with a view to the greater sharing of good practice.

Mar fhocal scoir, agus an ráiteas seo á chríochnú agam, ba mhaith liom fócasú ar na daoine a ba chóir dóibh bheith ag croílár ar gcórais oideachais: ár ndaoine óga agus a dtuismitheroirí.

Finally, as I finish my statement, I want to focus on the people who should be at the very heart of our education system: our young people and their parents. I want to make clear to the Assembly and to the people we serve my commitment to raising standards and closing the achievement gap. The Programme for Government rightly sets ambitious targets for us. I want to work with everyone who has an interest in education to see those targets achieved. By improving outcomes for our young people, we improve opportunities for them, too.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): When coming to the House, I always look through what the Minister is going to say. I note that he used the words "exciting development". I have to say that there will be few teachers, in any school, sitting on the edge of their seat today as a result of the content of the Minister's speech. However, we welcome the fact that he has come back to the House and tried to expand on the statement that he made last year. I am concerned that teachers listening today will be of the opinion that they are being asked to pick up the tab for the failures of the Department rather than address the issues currently in our education system. I am disappointed that, at a time when the Minister is well aware of many issues, particularly around the computer-based assessments NILA and NINA, no leadership is being given by his Department on those issues.

I want to ask the Minister a question that specifically relates to the entitlement framework, which he made reference to today and in his previous statement. Will the Minister consider the suspension of the withdrawal of funding for the entitlement framework until the common funding formula has been set before him and he sees what alternatives are being proposed by Sir Bob Salisbury? I ask that for the simple reason that there is a disconnect between his policy on the delivery of the entitlement framework and the financial structures in place to ensure that that policy is met. Will the Minister give serious consideration to that issue to ensure that we have in our schools a connection that is relevant to policy and practice? At this time, that is lacking.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. He states that before he comes into the Chamber he always, quite rightly, evaluates what the Minister is going to say. He states that he doubts that teachers will listen to the announcement with excitement. It always amazes me how the Member manages to

evaluate what the outside world thinks after I have just sat down.

I have no doubt that there will be different views on what I have said today in the teaching profession, among parents and among boards of governors. However, let me make it clear: I am not pointing the finger solely at teachers. We have a collective responsibility to improve the educational outcomes of our young people. Within that collective responsibility, there is a role for teachers. I said in my statement that the vast majority of our teachers are excellent; they are great educators. However, we have to accept that there are teachers out there who require retraining or are no longer effective. I do not believe that we have the mechanisms in place to deal with that quickly and efficiently enough to make an impact, but I want discussions on how we deal with that to continue apace with the trade unions.

I also set out a challenge for me, as Minister. I have called in OECD to inspect our education system — the education system that I, as Minister, am in charge of. The buck stops with me. OECD is coming to inspect my role as Minister and the policies that I have delivered. I do not think that I can be any more open and transparent than that, when I am bringing in a group of experts to tell me whether I am doing a good job or not. So, I am taking on my responsibility.

There is a challenge for the Education Committee in this, and it will continue to conduct its work. There is also a challenge for this Assembly and this society in relation to raising educational attainment for our young people, because, although we are improving, we need to do better.

The Member made a number of other comments. As regards the computer-based assessment, at the close of play on the Friday before the Halloween recess, around 100 schools were facing difficulties. The computer experts now tell me that they have identified a problem in the system and have identified a way to resolve that problem. They are running further tests before they put that into the system. However, we do not have wide-scale problems with the computer-based assessments; we do not have a shambles; we do not have a crisis. We have a difficulty and a problem. It would be interesting for the Member to know that the same percentage of schools has completed the computer-based assessment at this point as had completed InCAS last year at this point. Schools are carrying out the computer-based assessment, and schools with problems are engaging with

C2k and CCEA. In a number of instances, we can resolve the problem in the school. There may be a computer glitch there, which they have a remedy for, and they are deciding on the best way to insert that remedy into the system.

With regard to the entitlement framework, I am not going to suspend the withdrawal of financing around that at this time. I have brought in Bob Salisbury, who is a well-respected individual, and his team, and they are looking at how we fund our schools. Mr Salisbury's report should be with me in January or early spring of next year. I will take on board his recommendations and study them carefully, and I will make a decision on the way forward for funding at that time.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Will the Minister expand on the purpose of the OECD report?

Mr O'Dowd: I have decided, for a number of reasons, to bring in the OECD. One of the reasons is to internationalise the debate around education in this society. For many years, we lived off the propaganda that we had a world-class education system. It is difficult for an Education Minister to stand up and say this, but we do not have a world-class education system. We have world-class educationalists working in an education system, and we have world-class institutions working in the education system, but the overall system is not world-class. We need it to be world-class. Continually, we compare ourselves against England and Wales and against the South, but we need to compare ourselves against the best in the world to ensure that our young people have every opportunity to compete in a global economic market.

The OECD is an international body whose research reports are highly regarded. The outcomes of the research will provide us with an independent assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of our education system, pointing up areas for improvement as well as areas that are performing well. The review will look at the various components of assessment and evaluation frameworks, with the objective of improving student outcomes. Twenty-five other countries are participating in one form or another in this important review, and 13 countries, along with us, are having country reviews. That includes countries as far afield as New Zealand and, in respect of the Flemish countries, Belgium. The total cost of carrying out the review will be between £78,000 and £86,000, depending on the sterling exchange rate at that time.

The Department of Education is currently finalising a country background report that will provide the review team with information on the education systems here, including the current assessment arrangements. A preliminary visit by the review team will take place on 21 and 22 November, with the purpose of identifying the key issues. The external review team, which includes two independent experts, will visit in early 2013 and hold discussions with a broad and relevant group of people. A draft report will be provided four months following the review. Once finalised, the report will be published on the OECD website and will provide, from an international perspective, an independent analysis of major issues facing the education assessment framework here.

11.30 am

So, we have the best in the world coming in to evaluate us and measure our systems. They will report, and that report will be open and transparent. That presents a challenge to me as Minister; to my Department; and to the Assembly. However, I welcome that challenge because I firmly believe that, as a society, we have to get out of our cocoon and start talking about education in an international framework, rather than in a narrow framework, as we do currently.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement, which talks about everything and nothing. It is appallingly self-congratulatory on how well he is doing things badly.

Its key point is leadership. The Minister is absolutely right on leadership. However, Napoleon said that an army marches on its stomach. We have to look after the welfare of the soldiers, who, in this case, are teachers, parents and pupils. What is the Minister putting in place to make sure that he listens to parents, teachers and pupils, and not just to unions, so that he knows where he is taking them and they know where they are going? At the moment, he is not looking after the stomachs of his teachers and pupils.

Mr O'Dowd: Well, at least the Member has not accused me of having a secret plot to create a united Ireland through this statement. It may be a disappointment on my behalf, rather than congratulating me. The Member will also be aware that Napoleon floundered during the Russian winter and lost the majority of his army in his dreadful retreat from there. Napoleon is an interesting historical character. I am not sure whether he had any input in the development of a modern education system.

However, he was prone to defeat. I would like to learn from Napoleon on a number of factors. Yes, you should listen to people on the ground. You should also learn from international lessons and best practice. Everybody knows that you should never go to Russia in winter, and I have no intention of bringing our education system into any kind of Russian winter.

My statement was not self-congratulatory. As Minister, I have stood here and said that the Department that I am in charge of has serious challenges ahead. We have to reassure ourselves that we have the right policies in place to deliver. I am bringing in a group of international experts to examine my role as Minister. I am not aware that any other Minister in the Executive is doing that.

There is also a challenge for the education workforce. There is a challenge for the teaching workforce, and the principals. The inspection report and the schools inspectorate tell us that leadership is a key issue and that delivery of teaching on the ground is a key issue in a number of schools. I acknowledge that the vast majority of teachers are excellent. However, we must also accept that a number of teachers either require retraining or should be allowed to leave the service for the betterment of education. So, there is a challenge for the Minister and the workforce.

Do I listen to teachers? Yes. I meet trade unions, teaching associations, individual schools and groups of teachers regularly. I listen to them. Do I always agree with them? No, I do not. However, I listen to them. As Minister, I have a responsibility to lead. I take that leadership responsibility very seriously. I am saying to the education sector and the workforce, "There are challenges for you and for me". If we both deliver on those challenges, we will improve outcomes for young people.

Mr Rogers: The Minister mentioned a computer glitch. Having sat down with school principals and children in front of those NINA screens, believe me, I know that it is much more than a computer glitch. However, I welcome the Minister's comments on leadership — leadership of schools and in classrooms. What support will be given to existing principals to develop their leadership skills in order to develop a more effective self-evaluation process in schools?

Mr O'Dowd: On his first point, if the Member has been in a primary school that is facing difficulties, that should be reported to C2K, which will interrogate the system in the school

and externally. I am not saying that there is no problem. There is a problem in a small number of schools now. It can be and is being resolved. So, we should not over-egg the pudding on that issue. We are not facing a computer meltdown. There are some instances when schools cannot do the assessment. I am also of the strong view that there are a small minority of schools that will not do the assessment. There is a difference between cannot and will not. That needs to be resolved as well.

With regard to continuous professional development for all teachers and leaders, there is currently a number of training programmes in place. As we head towards the establishment of ESA and the wind-down of the education boards, I am concerned that that support is not as effective and efficient as it can be, because of the wind-down. ESA will be in charge of a newly developed support service, but I have asked my officials to interrogate what is in place and to produce a report and recommendations for me on what we need to do in the interim. I do not want a gap in provision between the boards and CASS, and ESA. Provision has to be continuous. That work will be ongoing, and I intend to take a partial interest in the matter.

The inspectorate referred to the programmes for developing new leaders and said that those were perhaps not as joined up across the system. That has come back to me from a number of channels, so I want to take a look at how we identify new leaders, how we support them to get into leadership positions and, once they are in leadership positions, how we keep them there.

As Mr Rogers will be aware, being a school principal is a rewarding but very challenging post. It is an important post in our society, and that has to be recognised. When people are doing well, we have to congratulate them, support them and put the measures in place. When people are under pressure, a network of support has to be put in place. However, we also have to be able to challenge principals when they are failing. If retraining does not work and the support mechanisms are not enough, we have to ask this question: should that principal remain in post? We have not been able to answer that question effectively and efficiently.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Minister's very wide-ranging statement, which, without wanting to agree totally with Mr Kinahan, is just the latest in a long line of wide-ranging statements. Like me, perhaps the Minister would like to see more outcomes and fewer initiatives. He referred to

the start of the legislative journey towards ESA. Does he agree that it is vital that ESA be established as quickly as possible, as it is connected to all the various suggestions in his statement? If you have not got a proper organisation at the top of the tree, how on earth will everything filter down?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. Sometimes it is a case of being damned if you do and damned if you don't. Ministers are criticised for not bringing initiatives to the Assembly, for not being proactive in developing their respective Departments, for not putting policies in place, and so on, but when they do, they are criticised for having too many initiatives.

The statement is a background analysis of the autumn statement. It also provides background information on the inspectorate's report, and I believe that it was only right and proper that I repeated parts of that to put into context what I plan to do. The major initiative is that we are bringing in the OECD. The other initiatives deal with leadership, the negotiating machinery and the programmes of work that need to be rolled out.

I agree with the Member in this context: even I as Minister find it frustrating at times, because it is difficult to get policies and initiatives working on the ground. That is not a criticism of my civil servants. I am very lucky, because I have a very good team of civil servants around me in the Department of Education. However, the system can at times be very cumbersome and slow to deliver, and I think that the Executive and the Assembly need to look at that as well.

Mr Lunn: ESA?

Mr O'Dowd: Apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Lunn: That was my question.

Mr O'Dowd: It was the second part of your question. I agree with you wholeheartedly that we need to get ESA in place as quickly as possible. I have done my bit by bringing the ESA legislation to the Chamber. The Bill is now with the Education Committee, and I have to respect the role of the Committee and the Assembly in developing it. I encourage them to work through it as quickly as possible. However, it is out of my hands at this stage.

Miss M McIlveen: I listened to the statement with interest, especially the Minister's reference to closing the achievement gap. With that in mind, has he given any particular consideration

to the 2,644 looked-after children in Northern Ireland and to the possibility of introducing a pupil premium plus for looked-after children, an action that has been recommended by the all-party group for looked-after children at Westminster.

Mr O'Dowd: When you are dealing with young people, statistics do not accurately reflect the fact that you are dealing with real people's lives. Looked-after children continue to be reflected in that, as do the challenges that they face as young people in education. Through SEN and other initiatives, we introduced proposals to assist them across the broader range of pressures that they face. However, I am more than happy to study the recommendations from Westminster, and if there are proposals that would be workable in our education system, I am more than happy to explore them and, if I have the resources, bring them forward.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin ar maidin. Will the Minister outline what he means by modernising the negotiation machinery?

Mr O'Dowd: The issue is one that, in fairness to all trade unions and the management side, has been raised continuously with me. It can be quite cumbersome and slow to get agreements through the current negotiating machinery. Under the current system, we have several different employer bodies, whereas we will be dealing with a single employer through ESA, so now is an opportune time to look at our negotiating machinery, and it is only right that we do that.

The current procedures for dealing with teachers, including principals and vice-principals, whose work is assessed as unsatisfactory have been in place since 1997. I know that they are considered by the management and teachers' side of the teachers' negotiation committee to be no longer fit for purpose. I understand that they are difficult to manage and take too long to reach a conclusion. The joint working party of the General Teaching Council has, therefore, established a working group to review the current procedures and create a new procedure for supporting effective leadership in schools.

All sides recognise that the process is slow and cumbersome. We need to improve the mechanisms and reach decisions. We need those bodies to come to decisions, because I continually meet boards of governors who are frustrated by their inability to deal with

ineffective teachers under the current system. If I am putting in place support mechanisms for teachers and a mechanism to scrutinise my Department and myself, it is only right and proper that we reach a conclusion on how we deal with unsatisfactory teachers and the unsatisfactory leadership of principals or vice-principals.

Mr Craig: I have noted with interest that if you want a statement from the Minister, all you have to do is table a motion and, sure enough, the week prior to it being debated, you have a statement. So I look forward to many more statements from the Minister.

You say in your statement:

"the Inspectorate makes a key contribution to raising standards. It acts as a catalyst for improvement."

If that is the case, Minister, why is there no clear, criteria-based targeting by the inspectorate? Why are there not regular inspections in schools? Why is it that we have to leave our schools until they are in crisis before the inspectorate goes in and deals with some of the hard issues?

Mr O'Dowd: As far as the timing of my statement is concerned, I have known for several months that the inspectorate was publishing a report. I was aware of the publication date and had planned to make a statement to the House in response to it.

I look forward to the debate next week on the motion that the DUP has sponsored. It will be a worthwhile debate that will keep the focus of society and the Assembly on the issues that we need to focus on. So I welcome that debate and any others that the Member wishes to bring forward.

The inspectorate does not wait until a school is in crisis or difficulties before it goes in. District inspectors regularly visit schools and report to the inspectorate on their progress. It is only right and proper that if the inspectorate is informed by a district inspector or receives any information that a school may be facing challenges, it produces a focused report on that school. It is not a case of the inspectorate turning up only once every seven or five years, or whatever it may be. A number of processes are in place, and the district inspector is key to those. Reports from boards of governors, parents or elected representatives may also trigger an inspection report.

I am happy that the inspectorate is doing a good job and that the Every School a Good School policy is beginning to deliver changes. As I said in my statement, 81% of re-inspected schools and institutions were shown to be improving. So, inspection also has a challenge and support function; it does not simply point out flaws. An inspection report also has to ensure that support is put in place for those schools. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, and 81% of improving schools have been inspected.

11.45 am

Mrs Dobson: Minister, I note that, discreetly tucked away at the back of your statement, is the reference to the creation of a dedicated governor support service. Have you consulted with governors and fully engaged with schools on that? Will you assure the House that such a service will not be a Sinn Féin-led entity that can manipulate rather than aid?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes. The first item on the agenda will be signing the members of the boards of governors up to join Sinn Féin. That is the secret ploy that we are involved in. It follows our secret ploy for ESA, which is the White Paper for uniting Ireland. You have caught me out. I do not know what to do next.

The UUP is going to have to get serious about education —

Mrs Dobson: We are.

Mr O'Dowd: No, you are not serious. With respect, you come out with nonsense. No harm to Mr Kinahan and Mrs Dobson, but you are individuals who are more capable and who have a greater insight into education than your coming to the House with the nonsense that you come out with on the direction of travel in education would suggest. How can anyone suggest that a good proposal that will put in place more training, more linkage between schools and sharing good practice, which boards of governors have been crying out for, is actually some sort of Sinn Féin initiative to brainwash them into some sort of other agenda? This is about improving educational outcomes for young people. If you do not agree with my policies, come forward with different policies; do not come forward with sound bites. That is not of any benefit to you, and it is of no benefit to education.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas a thug sé

dúinn ar maidin. I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. I welcome the creation of a dedicated service for governors. For too long, governors in their voluntary capacity have been left to stand alone. I wonder how the Minister envisages the stronger collective voice being heard from governors in our education system.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member's question is focused on what my proposal is about. We have around 10,000 members of boards of governors, and they all do that work on a voluntary capacity. I give credit to them, because it can be quite time-consuming. At times, it can be a quite difficult task, especially whenever you are dealing with budgets and staffing issues. That can be a very difficult function for anyone to carry out. I think that they deserve our support.

However, they also deserve practical support. I have set aside half a million pounds per annum to bring forward a governor support body. It will be delivered under ESA, although I would like to see it in shape before ESA comes into final play. The chief executive designate of ESA, Gavin Boyd, has been tasked with bringing forward proposals on that, which will involve discussions with boards of governors. Indeed, at the start of this year, senior officials from my Department travelled to all parts and parts of the North to give presentations to the boards of governors on departmental policies and direction and then to have informed discussions with them about their role and their views on education. Both sides found that very informative. Following those and further discussions, we will bring forward a training and support package for those 10,000 governors. That is financed, and I believe that boards of governors across all sectors will welcome it a great deal.

Mr G Robinson: Why is it necessary to bring in the OECD when the Minister has his own inspectorate? Will he clarify whether the OECD team will be inspecting his Department?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, the OECD will inspect my Department. That will be its primary function. It will look at the systems and policies that are in play for the delivery of education. My Department and I will be under inspection. I think that it is only right and proper that if we inspect schools, we should bring someone in to inspect my Department's role.

Why the OECD? It is a very highly respected international educational body across a number of subjects. Its reports on economic development, and so on, are highly regarded.

Those people are well tested and respected to do so.

talk to their prospective schools about future courses that they can deliver.

We also need to internationalise our education debate. The DUP, Sinn Féin, the UUP, the Alliance Party, the SDLP and other Independents all have their own views on education. Our views can sometimes be very insular, and we can be competitive and combative with one another — rightly so; that is the nature of politics. An outside view might help all of us and allow us to refresh our thinking on international evidence-based information and to move forward in a more co-operative and agreed format than we do at present. I welcome the fact that political debate and differences of opinion are part of our system, but I think that we would benefit from an international perspective on our education system.

Mr McAleer: The Minister's statement referred to the entitlement framework. Will he tell us why parents and pupils should have an interest in their schools' ability to deliver on the entitlement framework?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. The entitlement framework requires schools to offer a wide range of courses, options at Key Stage 4 and post-16. At least one third of those courses must be general, and one third must be applied. Schools will also be required to provide pupils with access to a set number of general and applied subjects. The Department published a list of general courses and applied courses that schools use for the purposes of the entitlement framework. The definitions that were previously in use were developed some time ago and were quite complex. In last year's autumn statement, I gave a commitment that the definitions would be reviewed. They were revised by a group of principals, the Education and Training Inspectorate and CCEA representatives and were published last December.

Parents and pupils should be interested in this issue because the post-primary courses that students study will decide their pathways for the rest of their lives. The entitlement framework allows for a greater balance of applied, vocational and academic subjects, which will result in more rounded students with more rounded futures, whether they go to university, enter apprenticeships, or whatever it may be. The framework gives a broader understanding of society, education, career choices, and so on. There is now a legislative duty on schools to provide such a range of courses, so it is only right and proper that parents and pupils start to

Executive Committee Business

Superannuation Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Superannuation Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel).]

Mr Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Superannuation Bill at this stage. Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is, therefore, concluded.

Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill: Final Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel — when he is ready.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: Does the Minister wish to address this issue?

Mr Wilson: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. Could I maybe —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Yes, take a few seconds. Members may take their ease. It is not a problem.

Mr Wilson: I apologise. I was not listening to what you were asking me to do, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I beg to move

That the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill [NIA 15/11-15] do now pass.

I take this opportunity to thank Members for their support for the Bill's passage through the Assembly. I also thank the Committee for Finance and Personnel for dealing with the matter at such speed. It was important to move the matter on quickly, so I appreciate the Committee's work.

As I have said in earlier debates on the Bill, I, along with many other Members, would have preferred it if it had been possible for the Bill to have gone through by normal means. Unfortunately, however, because our objective was to have the Bill enacted by 1 January 2013, normal passage was not possible and we had to go for accelerated passage.

I believe that the Bill is a vital piece of legislation, which, in delivering on the Executive's commitment to eliminate air passenger duties on direct long-haul flights departing from airports in Northern Ireland, will improve and protect international air access. That is important from the point of view of promoting economic growth in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has made it quite clear how that link helps to promote investment opportunities, especially from North America.

I know that Members continue to have concerns about air passenger duty generally, and its

impact on short-haul flights. I also know that many Members desire a reduction in air passenger duty across the board. I have made it quite clear that we did not seek the devolution of all air passenger duty powers. That would have been expensive — it would have cost about £90 million had we devolved it and taken the rate down to zero. I know that some Members argued that it did not all have to come down to zero. Nevertheless, the assessment that the Executive made was, first, that they wanted to get the issue resolved speedily — we would still have been talking about the devolution of air passenger duty had we gone for full devolution, and we probably would have lost the flight to Newark by now. Secondly, we had to ask what was the best way of using those resources.

I can also advise Members that the Department, alongside the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD), is undertaking work to consider further options that will improve connectivity, including on air passenger duty and non-related actions that might be taken. As I am sure the Chairman of the Committee will point out, that is in response to one of the recommendations in the Committee's report on the issue.

In summary, the elimination of air passenger duty on direct long-haul flights is the main measure being taken forward through the Bill today. I look forward to Members' support to ensure that the Bill clears its Final Stage so that it can gain Royal Assent in time to introduce the measure for 1 January.

I was with representatives of Belfast International Airport yesterday, and they could not have emphasised more strongly the importance of this measure. I know that they are seeking, with great diligence, to look at how we can build on this legislation to increase connectivity with other parts of the world and to look for other direct long-haul flights. That will not only help the economy through investment and tourism but it will help to make one of our important strategic transport locations even more viable for the future. I commend the Bill to the House.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the Final Stage of the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill, and recognise that its passage will lead to the timely outworking of setting a zero rate of duty for direct long-haul flights ahead of the target date of January 2013.

The Minister originally briefed the Committee on 3 October 2012. He responded to the Committee's report on air passenger duty and advised that he intended to seek accelerated passage for the Bill.

12.00 noon

Before the Bill was introduced to the Assembly, the Committee engaged in an extensive evidence-gathering process on the proposals in the Westminster Finance Bill, which would transfer setting the rates of APD for direct long-haul flights to the Assembly. It became apparent during the Committee's consultations that there was a clear need to alleviate the burden of APD on direct long-haul flights from the North, especially in light of the more competitive position enjoyed by Dublin Airport. The Committee discussed how infrastructure was bringing Dublin closer to Belfast, and it considered that that should be taken into account in any future decisions on APD and our transport infrastructure.

The Committee received written submissions from a range of stakeholders and took oral evidence from Belfast City Airport, the international airport, Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau, the Hotels Federation, the Consumer Council and the Federation of Small Businesses. In its report, the Committee recognised APD as a:

"regressive tax which is particularly disadvantageous to businesses, consumers and the wider economy"

The North's peripheral location and dependency on air travel has undoubtedly been compounded by the South's airports enjoying a competitive advantage due to the low rate of the APD-equivalent air travel tax of €3 for all flights. The Committee also noted that a number of European Governments, including those of Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands, had reduced, withdrawn or not implemented aviation duty because of the adverse impacts that it had had on their aviation industries. The Committee's report made a number of evidence-based recommendations to the Department, the majority of which were accepted.

The Bill's primary purpose is to alleviate the burden of APD rates by setting a zero rate of APD on direct long-haul flights from the North. Members will be mindful of the significance of aviation to the local economy, not only because of the reliance on air travel but in increasing tourist numbers and attracting business

investment to the region. Although direct long-haul flights represent only around 1.5% of flights from the North, the policy intentions behind the Bill include the aim of retaining the North's economically important long-haul flights and, hopefully, developing new strategic flight connections. I certainly put a number of questions to the Enterprise Minister as well because I believe that she has a key role to play in conjunction with the Finance Minister in trying to open up new avenues to places such as Canada and looking at flights that perhaps previously existed. That obviously flags up the potential that is there to open up new routes to the benefit of the economy and the tourism sector.

Under previous rates of APD, airlines were forced to absorb the costs of the duty in order to retain services locally. The negative impact of the duty is demonstrated by the United Airlines example. The airline had to absorb around £3.2 million of costs to keep the Belfast to Newark route viable, a position that was clearly unsustainable. The risk of losing such long-haul routes if the Bill was not enacted by 1 January placed an urgency on the consideration and passage of the Bill. Therefore, the Committee agreed to support the Minister in seeking approval for the Bill to proceed by accelerated passage. Given the importance of retaining the Newark flight route, the immediate potential to attract more business and trade to the North and the detailed scrutiny already undertaken, the Committee agreed to support the Minister's request for accelerated passage in order to have the Bill in place by 1 January.

It was clear to the Committee that stakeholders regarded the provisions of the Bill as a step in the right direction. However, there were repeated calls for consideration to be given to extending the scope of the transferred powers to include short-haul band A flights, which represent 98.5% of flights from the North. In its report, the Committee concluded that the Executive, in the first instance, should continue to press the case with others for the abolishment of APD across the board. In his recent evidence to the Committee, however, the Minister confirmed that there was no prospect of the British Government softening their position of being wedded to using air passenger duty as a revenue-raising measure. Indeed, in its final report, the Committee also concluded:

"given both Treasury's insistence on devolution rather than exemption of APD and the determination of the .. Coalition Government to retain APD ... as a revenue-raising measure, any future reduction ... on

Band A flights ... is likely to be achieved only through the further devolution of powers to also cover Band A rates".

Although supportive of the continued campaign to abolish APD across the board, the Committee called on the Minister to propose that the Executive commission independent expert research into the business case for reducing or abolishing APD on band A flights departing from the North, including rigorous economic modelling and the forecasting of options, that would inform Executive consideration of whether or how wider devolved powers over air passenger duty should be exercised. In his response to the Committee report, the Minister advised that that research should consider the full range of options to improve the North's connectivity, including APD and non-APD-related actions that might be taken, and he confirmed that his officials were in discussion with counterparts in DETI and DRD to consider how that can best be commissioned. The Committee welcomes that planned work and looks forward to considering the associated terms of reference at the earliest opportunity. That and other work arising from the Bill is essential in order to maximise the economic opportunities that arise from devolution. The Committee will look forward to the combined efforts of DFP, DETI and DRD to establish new, direct, long-haul routes to key business and tourism hubs. The Committee will continue to engage with the Department in monitoring the outcome of that work, and, personally, I will be particularly interested in the outcome of the research into the business case for transferring band A flights. I believe that, given the economic circumstances in which we find ourselves, there is an onus on Ministers and the wider Executive to examine objectively all existing and potential strategic economic levers that can or could be utilised to help rebalance the regional economy.

To conclude, I should put on record the Committee's gratitude to all those who provided written and oral briefings during its scrutiny of air passenger duty. That was vital in allowing the Committee to establish a sound evidence base for its report and subsequent recommendations. I also thank the Minister and his Department for the constructive way in which they engaged with the Committee on the matter. Finally, I would also like to acknowledge the past and present members of the Committee for their time given in the detailed consideration of the policy proposals that lie behind the provisions in the Bill. I think that is nearly comprehensive enough.

From a party perspective, I think that we should take the recent news into account. I do not think that we should go through business today without mentioning the situation at Patton in my constituency of North Antrim. One of the issues that we considered and one of the examples that was flagged up during the Committee's consideration was the construction sector and how construction companies are positioning themselves to avail themselves of major projects on the island of Britain. I am aware of local workers who are involved in projects in places such as Wales. When you have a situation like that, with workers flying back and forward week in, week out, it costs thousands of pounds in air passenger duty for band A for those companies.

It is important to highlight that what remains to be discussed and debated is the further 98.5% of air passenger duty. We need to take into consideration the impact that that has on the real economy. Given the hit that construction and the construction community have taken and could take in the context of Ballymena and the domino effect that that will have on subcontractors in places like counties Derry and Antrim, air passenger duty is not only an issue of keeping flights open or tourism but a big issue for construction as well. I look forward to the work that will be undertaken by the Minister and his Department. I look forward to working constructively with him, because this is an area that has huge potential for our local economy. I welcome the progress that has been made by the Executive in securing the transfer of the powers to date, but we need a fuller debate on the full transfer of air passenger duty. The economic benefits are staring us in the face. Yes, there is a cost involved, and perhaps this will involve another rigorous negotiation with the British Government and the Treasury statisticians, who are more than willing to put one over on us. That is the challenge ahead for the Executive and for the Minister of Finance and Personnel. I look forward to taking that work forward on a constructive basis.

Mr Girvan: The Committee Chairperson has used this opportunity to link to the Patton issue. Very well done.

I welcome this debate, and, in doing so, I will take a slightly different stance. I appreciate the work that the Committee has done in its evidence sessions. To take APD on fully would involve a significant cost to the Northern Ireland Executive, and, as such, the route that the Minister and the Executive have taken — to put pressure on the Exchequer in London to look at APD in the region in its entirety — is the correct one. The UK suffers because of its stance on

this matter. I welcome the opportunity to take this on board, and, with only a modest hit to the block grant, we should secure the current situation. Although only long-haul flights will take advantage of these measures, it gives us an opportunity to encourage other airlines to come on board and see Northern Ireland as an opportunity to link to Europe as one of the major markets.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. In welcoming what the Bill opens up, I am sure that the Member, who has no constituency interest whatsoever in the matter, is a very firm supporter of the international airport. Does he welcome the opportunity that the Bill will open up for Belfast City Airport to introduce flights to Europe and other long-haul flights? I am sure that he will join me in welcoming that level of true competition.

Mr Girvan: As far as Northern Ireland is concerned, I appreciate Peter's tongue-in-cheek way of saying that. We have to look at securing what we have and make sure that we have a viable international airport. Belfast City Airport — George Best Airport, as it is called — is a city airport. There is an issue over the length of the runway there and its capability of dealing with certain long-haul flights. What is deemed to be a long-haul flight may be different for certain people, and reference has been made to a range and a band. Aldergrove has the capability of using that. I am not necessarily agreeing with Peter on that point, but we have to make sure that Aldergrove — Belfast International Airport, not Aldergrove — takes advantage of the opportunity to encourage additional long-haul flights. If any airlines can take advantage of that at the harbour airport, we should let them go ahead as well.

Northern Ireland has brought this forward as one of the tools to help us rebalance our economy and ensure that we do not miss opportunities. However, it is not just about tourism opportunities but about business and inward investment. We must allow work to go on through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to encourage additional flights. That work has been going on.

I welcome some of the things that I have been hearing about, indicating that there are other providers who have an interest in coming here, which would potentially reduce our dependence on taxpayers to fund certain things. I appreciate that this proposal was brought in to deal with an environmental tax. As far as I can see, it is not delivering on that basis. It has been brought in just to attract additional revenue. Carbon offsetting or whatever they

want to call it does not necessarily seem to have been the main objective. The objective seems to have been to rake additional money into the coffers.

12.15 pm

Now that we have this opportunity, we should see ourselves as a direct link into the United Kingdom and for those who want to tour. We are competing, which makes us different from most other regions. Dublin has a very reduced rate of APD. In fact, they have abolished it in several areas and are looking to do away with it in totality. As a result, we have to compete on that basis. A lot of other UK-based airports do not have the same competition. You can be in Dublin 40 minutes or an hour after crossing the border. We need to look at ensuring that people from Northern Ireland can take advantage of travelling from Northern Ireland and returning to Northern Ireland.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. In embracing the issue, we are embracing long-haul flights. The Chairman of the Committee raised the issue of the wider context of APD. Indeed, he made the argument effectively for the abolition, pretty much, of APD. There is a wider debate to be had on that. On this side of the House we believe that it is an issue that is still to be proven, and we proceed on an evidence basis. Earlier, you welcomed the fact that the Chairman managed to shoehorn Patton into the debate. Will you also welcome the fact that the party opposite has obviously had a conversion to Thatcherite low taxation? Irrespective of the merits of the debate, the clear Damascene conversion that has happened across the way is to be welcomed.

Mr Girvan: I am glad to hear that. I did not appreciate that Sinn Féin had turned into part of the Tory party. Thank you very much for that. I welcome that, if it is the case.

I very much welcome the opportunity to bring this forward. We hope and pray that many flights will take advantage of it. I thank the Finance Minister and the Executive for the work that they have put into it and the Committee for the evidence that has been brought forward, and I congratulate them on that. We have had a good balance in the way that it has been presented.

Mr Cree: I support the Bill at its Final Stage. The Committee has spent a lot of time taking evidence and has dealt with the subject most thoroughly. APD started off as an environmental tax, but it is clearly now a

fundraising tax for the Government. The European Union emissions trading scheme was introduced in the United Kingdom in January. It is designed as an environmental tax. It relates to fuel inefficiency in aircraft, the miles flown and the load carried. It is a more practical method of taxing aviation pollution costs. Therefore, APD is exposed for what it is: simply a government fundraising exercise. APD should be scrapped or at least offset against the European trading emissions scheme. That is something that the Minister might take up in another place.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le fáilte a chur roimh an chéim deiridh den Bhille seo. I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill. As we know, it devolves to the Assembly the power to set the rate of APD to be applied to passengers on direct long-haul flights that take off from destinations in Northern Ireland, known as band B, C and D flights.

The measure was spurred by the fact that the existing flight from Belfast to Newark was in danger. That flight is essential, in so far as it brings in huge revenue from business and tourism. Other powers over APD, specifically for band A flights, will not be devolved through the Bill. As we know, under the Azores judgement, the cost of measures such as this has to be borne by the Executive. In this case, the cost to the block grant is, we are told, around £5 million. That is a price worth paying, considering that the flight in question benefited this region to the extent of around £100 million over seven years. Indeed, the airports have told us that, were we to gain the services of three new carriers with similar passenger levels, there would be the potential to create between £300 million and £400 million in extra revenue over a similar period. Therefore, this is a good deal for us and one that we should welcome. As the airports suggest, there is a market for further flights of this type, and that is a market that we should exploit and exploit to the full. I have been in touch with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about that potential, and she assures me that she and her Department are doing their utmost to gain the maximum benefit from the Bill. That is also to be welcomed.

The Chair of the Committee mentioned the other element of the debate, which deals with band A flights. Band A flights make up 98.5% of flights from here, compared with 17% in the UK. That shows clearly that we are dependent on air travel. We have not gained the exemption that the Scottish highlands and islands have gained from the band A duty,

because apparently we do not qualify under the revised European rules. That is a pity, but it is a fact that we must face. We should explore the possibility of powers being transferred to vary the band A duty as well. When we look at Dublin, we see that the domestic rate for APD is around €3 compared with £13 here. That does not make us very competitive.

Some Members will mention the cost of the transferral of powers over band A duty, which is estimated to be £50 million to £60 million per annum. That may or may not be true. I agree with the Committee's recommendations in its report that a proper cost-benefit analysis should be carried out on the transfer of powers over duty for band A flights and a business case made. At the end of the day, if the powers were transferred, they would give us the ability to vary APD. That does not mean that the cost would need to be at the maximum level. The Executive would have the power to set the rate.

The Chairman mentioned most of the major points that were raised during the Committee's evidence sessions and by members of the Committee, and I am largely in agreement with the points that he made. On behalf of the SDLP, I welcome the Bill and the effects that it will have. I urge the Minister to explore the possibility of extending the powers to cover band A flights. A LeasCheann Comhairle, gabhaim buíochas leat.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to speak at Final Stage and echo my colleague Judith Cochrane's previous statements on the legislation. It represents a significant step forward as we seek to create a more competitive Northern Ireland. In this and previous debates on the legislation, the difficulties that we face in Northern Ireland due to our unique geographical position, with stiff competition from the Republic of Ireland, have been outlined. With an already low rate of APD in the Republic of Ireland, this legislative change will start to at least bring us closer to a level playing field with our southern neighbours on long-haul flights and will further enhance our capacity to attract new business.

This progress, however, is not the end of the story. As we look to strengthen our position in future global markets, we must seek to use this momentum to build on our successes. It is essential that we continue to push for the further devolution of regional air regulation if we are to meet our long-term goals, and, in this regard, I urge the Executive and the Minister to lobby and fight for greater Treasury co-operation in redressing inconsistencies. The track record of our air travel sector in

contributing to the economy and employment market is clear for all to see, and, on this basis, there is a rationale for further extending the facility to set our own APD rates to include travel closer to home. The fact remains that current short-haul rates continue to have a detrimental impact on regional flights within the UK and, undeniably, place a premium on our connectivity with the rest of the United Kingdom.

One issue has not yet been raised by Members in today's debate. It is the further disadvantaging of local travellers by the double payment of APD on other short-haul destinations when you have to transit through one of the London hub airports. Flights to many parts of Europe are simply not delivered from any of the three Northern Ireland airports, so we suffer a double whammy from having to pay the lower rate of APD twice.

I ask the Minister to continue to deal with those issues as we welcome and support the introduction of the Bill. As previously stated by other Members and as will no doubt be said after me, the devolution of long-haul APD rates is an opportune step forward on the road to addressing disparity for Northern Ireland air travellers. The Alliance Party supports the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister to wind up the debate on the motion.

Mr Wilson: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was listening this time, so I actually got your instructions. I thank all Members for taking part in the debate and for their unanimous support.

I left these remarks to the end, because I did not want to make them in my opening speech. I was hoping that, at some time during the debate, the Member of the Green Party might have drifted in to take part. Let us not forget that air passenger duty and a lot of the other tax impositions that have befallen the poor population of the United Kingdom were at the behest of people such as those who populate and support the Green Party. They have said that they will change behaviour by imposing financial hardship on the people of the United Kingdom. I would love to have heard his view on the issue. Perhaps the unanimous opinion that we have had around the House would not have been as evident. He has dodged out of this because, I suspect, he knows that this and many of the other green taxes are not all that popular with the people, even some of the people who support him. The rhetoric sometimes disguises the real impact that some of the Green Party's policies would have on our

daily lives and how they would hit the pockets of people across the United Kingdom.

I will deal with some of the issues that have been raised. I thank the Chairman and all the other Committee members who have spoken for the work that they have done. A number of issues raised are worth dealing with.

12.30 pm

The Chairman made a very important point about what we should do to build on this for the future. Once the Bill gets Royal Assent, we will have a zero rate of tax on long-haul flights. However, the Chairman's point was that there is significant work to be done in capitalising on that to bring in other long-haul flights. There is a bit of a chicken-and-egg situation here. The Chairman quite rightly raised the issue of the role of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, especially the Tourist Board and Tourism Ireland, in getting those direct flights. The evidence is that airlines will be interested in bringing planes to Northern Ireland not only on the basis that they will have a cost advantage of £135 on the tax, or whatever it happens to be, but on whether there is a market. Generating that market will probably require a lot of work that is focused in the areas from where we think we can best get the direct long-haul flights.

On the other hand, of course, Tourism Ireland and the Tourist Board will argue this point: why should we spend money promoting Northern Ireland in a certain place if flights are not already available to transport the people who you are seeking to market? I will have to have a conversation with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment about how we make sure that, now that we have the advantage, we build up a market and can approach airlines.

The Chairman quite rightly identified that the Canadian market is one that must be targeted initially. At one stage not so long ago, 50,000 people a year travelled from Northern Ireland to Canada and back on direct flights. So, there is already a market there that I think that we can capitalise on. If we can prove that there is a market and can spend some money promoting it, it will be easier to get some of the airlines interested in flying that particular route. There are a number of other areas that I think would be natural targets for us, both for investment and tourist potential. Again, the same amount of work needs to be done on those. However, it means that some finance has to be risked in trying to promote Northern Ireland in those places, even though we initially do not have the direct flights.

The Chairman and other Members also raised the issue of extending air passenger duty to include band A flights. The Chairman also made the point that a lot of construction industries might benefit from that. Anybody who goes on a flight first thing on a Monday morning or comes back late on a Friday afternoon will see just how packed those flights are, especially with people who have gone over to England or Scotland to work and who then fly back. His argument is that if we were to reduce air passenger duty on those flights, it would help to reduce the costs of the firms that are seeking to get work in England, Scotland or Wales and would, therefore, make them more competitive. Mr Bradley made a similar point.

That is a reasonable point to make. I suppose that the difficulty is ensuring that you are targeting the reduction for those kinds of people because, of course, lots of people will travel on flights from Northern Ireland for purposes that are not work related. You would be subsidising those flights at the cost of the public purse here in Northern Ireland. Given that it is difficult to differentiate between different kinds of passenger, you cannot always be sure that the money will be well targeted. The same applies when you consider other flights that people are using to maybe go away for weekend breaks further afield, etc. In that situation, you are actually taking money out of the Northern Ireland economy. How do you differentiate between those who are going for business purposes, which is bringing work back to Northern Ireland or is bringing money into the Northern Ireland economy, and those who are simply going away for pleasure and are taking money out of the Northern Ireland economy?

Mr Bradley suggested that one of the ways in which the cost could be reduced was to have air passenger duty for band A devolved to Northern Ireland but not reduce it by the full amount. However, given the fact that it is sitting at around £13, even if you were to halve it, you must ask yourself whether, marginally, it would make much of an impact on the cost of a flight and whether it would generate all that much extra business. I suspect that £6 is not going to deter people from flying into or out of Northern Ireland. Although it would be one way of reducing the cost, I am not so sure that it would have the impact that the Member is hoping it would have; that is, making that travel much more competitive.

Mr Cree raised an important issue. I need to check my facts on this one, but given the European emissions trading scheme and the fact that people will have to buy credits to burn fossil fuels, he is asking whether this is double

taxation? I am not too sure whether it applies, or is intended to apply, to the aviation industry. If so, then he is right that there would be double taxation.

The whole point of having air passenger duty was that it was a tax that sought to deter people from travelling on airplanes and, therefore, it cut down the amount of fuel burned by flights from the United Kingdom and, as a result, it reduced carbon emissions. If the airlines are already required to buy credits for doing that anyway, all we are doing by imposing this tax is making our own aviation industry less competitive than that in other parts of the world where such a tax is not imposed.

We already know that this was the whole purpose behind the Irish Government reducing the tax to €3: they saw it as a way of making their flights more competitive than those from Northern Ireland, or, I suspect, those from other parts of the United Kingdom. People could fly into Dublin and then take long-haul flights and escape a sizeable amount of tax; and if they were flying business class, they could save well over £100. There is an element involved, although I am not too sure of my facts and, therefore, do not want to say that there is double counting as the trading scheme may not apply to the aviation industry.

Mr Dixon made an important point on which we need to have further discussion. There is a growing body of opinion across the United Kingdom saying that we are disadvantaging our aviation industry by having air passenger duty full stop. I hear that at Westminster as well. At the start of the debate, I was teasing about the Green Party. Although air passenger duty started off as an environmental tax, the Chancellor has made it quite clear now that it is a lucrative way of raising revenue. Airline travel is increasing and is designed to increase very rapidly over the next number of years, which is one of the reasons why they are having to look at extending airports, etc. So, this is a good way for the Treasury to make money. However, there is growing opinion that this is disadvantaging the aviation industry as a whole. One of the points that we need to make in the debate is that if air passenger duty disadvantages the aviation industry as a whole — and the Member made a very important point here — it doubly disadvantages the people who travel from Northern Ireland to hub airports in GB and then fly on. They are paying air passenger duty to get to the hub airport and then they are paying it again for the flight from the hub airport to wherever they happen to be going. That is because we do not have direct long-haul flights to more than one destination.

Of course, if that is true for people in Northern Ireland, it is probably true in regions across the United Kingdom, whether it is the north of England or Scotland, because a lot of people fly from the north of England down to Heathrow, etc. They would, therefore, face the double payment. That is a general point that needs to be made.

We have said that DETI, DRD and ourselves will look at other options, and we have given that commitment to the Committee, but, for the immediate future, the emphasis will be on direct long-haul flights from Northern Ireland. I know that has been welcomed by the international airport and Continental Airlines, and I hope that we will be able to build on that to have a greater number of direct flights to other parts of the world.

I have made this point in previous discussions with the Committee. Some time ago, I attended an event in the House of Commons at which they were talking about the airline industry. I spoke to the chief executive, I think it was, of Newcastle airport. He told me that since they had started direct flights to, I think, Dubai — I cannot really remember, but I think it was Dubai, or somewhere in the Middle East anyway — the amount of business that that region had commissioned with the area where the direct flight was going had increased tenfold. I suppose that epitomises the importance of this measure. If we can find ways of increasing the number of direct flights from here to other parts of the world, there could be huge business consequences and, therefore, job consequences for people in Northern Ireland. Of course, that fits in very well with the objective that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has of growing exports in markets that are not declining, but in parts of the world where markets are expanding.

I thank Members for their support. I thank Sinn Féin, which now supports the DUP policy of low taxation, as has been pointed out by my colleague. We can tick air passenger duty off the list; we can tick corporation tax off the list; we can tick the regional rate off the list. I am glad to see that we have had a leavening influence on Sinn Féin on this. Perhaps it is moving from deep red to slight pink. Who knows? Maybe they will become true blues before the end of this Assembly period.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think the Minister's concluding remarks were well off the subject.

Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that under the provisions of section

30A(13) of the Finance Act 1994, the Bill must pass with cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Air Passenger Duty (Setting of Rate) Bill [NIA 15/11-15] do now pass.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As there are eyes from all sides of the House, and there are no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 4.00 pm, as agreed by the Business Committee at its meeting yesterday. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.44 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

4.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Mr Speaker: Questions 3 and 9 have been withdrawn and require a written answer.

DARD: Headquarters

1. **Mr Hussey** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she consulted all relevant Executive Ministers before deciding on Ballykelly as a suitable location for her Department's headquarters. (AQO 2782/11-15)

5. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will publish the business case for the relocation of her Department's headquarters. (AQO 2786/11-15)

7. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether she will support the development of a rail halt at Ballykelly to help staff who will be commuting to there when her Department's headquarters are relocated. (AQO 2788/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, I will answer questions 1, 5 and 7 together.

Advancing the relocation of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development headquarters to a rural location is one of the Executive's Programme for Government commitments. The decision on the specific location of the DARD headquarters is a matter for me, as Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. That decision came at the end of a structured process that involved an assessment of 23 potential locations against a defined set of criteria, plus the fact that there is an Executive-owned site comprising a range of buildings, some of which have the potential to be used for office accommodation. Since I made that decision, I have directed my officials to prepare a business case that considers the options that would deliver the headquarters on the Ballykelly site. The necessary work required to complete that business case is now well under way, and, once all the necessary

approval stages have been completed, I would be happy to consider publishing it.

I recognise that the location could cause problems for some existing staff. Therefore, I have outlined my commitment to use the time that we have available to ensure that the transition from a Belfast-based headquarters to the rural setting of Ballykelly is made as easy as possible for all staff involved.

I am aware that the railway line to Derry crosses the lower end of the site, and I have already written to my colleague the Minister for Regional Development inviting him to give serious consideration to a rail halt in the vicinity.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that Executive consultation was non-existent, would she agree that she showed a complete disregard for the pressure on local infrastructure in the area? Would it not have been better to have those conversations before you announced your decision?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member might be surprised to know that I do not agree. On 3 September, I brought my decision to the Executive. I announced to my colleagues the objective criteria that were applied. I informed them of my move and that I had decided on the Ballykelly site. As far as I am concerned, I did what I needed to do to inform my Executive colleagues of the way forward.

Mr Dickson: Minister, do you accept and agree that you will cause substantial disruption to families and children, particularly for those who currently work in the Department here in Belfast, and that families will have to consider the relocation of schools and homes? How will the Minister factor that in to her business case?

Mrs O'Neill: I have always said that I recognised that the location could cause some potential difficulties for some existing staff. I have given assurances that I do not want to see any existing staff being forced to move. I think we have enough time, over the next number of years, to facilitate everybody's needs. I am very committed to making sure that we work with the trade unions to make sure that staff interests are taken on board all along the process and have done that, to date, to get us to the position we are in now. I will take time to develop and implement the changes. We need to look at more flexible working patterns so that we can facilitate people's home and work balance. I do not expect that existing members of staff will be forced to move, but I accept that, sometimes, that is not possible in all situations.

However, I am committed to ensuring that we have two years ahead of us in which to plan properly for staff and filter into all decisions their needs as well.

Mr G Robinson: Is the Department making any financial contribution to a rail halt at Ballykelly?

Mrs O'Neill: The idea of a railway halt is a good one. From the outset, I can easily recognise the benefits that that would bring to the site, not just for DARD HQ staff but through the wider tourism potential that a stop there would provide. It is something that I would welcome and, as I said, something that I have written to Minister Danny Kennedy about. I want to explore the conversation even further with him with regard to the potential costs and how we can work together. I believe that a railway halt would provide benefits to the wider north-west area, not just DARD headquarters.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Can the Minister expand on the benefits of relocation?

Mrs O'Neill: The benefits are second to none, particularly in redressing the imbalance in public sector jobs. Some time ago, the Bain report looked at the independent review of the policy we had in the Executive for the location of public sector jobs. The proposed location of Ballykelly, which has now been announced, will naturally stimulate the local economy through increased local spending. The provision of the high-quality, well-paid public sector jobs at all levels right across the Civil Service that are being brought to the site addresses the imbalance that has existed for far too long. The relocation will also help to share the wealth right across the economy and will contribute to better and more appropriate balanced economic growth right across the North, as opposed to just concentrating on one area.

Mr Frew: In similar circumstances, we have an ex-military camp in St Patrick's Barracks, Ballymena, and Ballymena has been identified as a regional hub through the Bain report. How can the Minister choose Ballykelly over St Patrick's Barracks, which is the midst of a regional hub?

Mrs O'Neill: Many Members of the House would stand up and fight their corner for their constituency and rightly so; that would be proper. There was a programme board in place. It worked through all of the process and looked at all the objective criteria, which included deprivation, the availability of jobs, the

availability of public sector jobs and unemployment levels. When all those factors were applied, Limavady was at the top of the list, along with Strabane, so the north-west was at the top of the list. In that position, you then consider what is available to you. The fact that the Ballykelly site is Executive-owned was, in itself, a plus, as is the fact that there are buildings on the site that could potentially be used. I would not expect the Member to do anything less than to stand up for his constituency. That is natural.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister agree that Ballykelly is right bang in the middle of a high unemployment area that has lost thousands of jobs in the past five years? Despite the disappointment of some of my colleagues around the Chamber, will the Minister assure me that, as far as possible, 800 jobs will go to Ballykelly?

Mrs O'Neill: As I have said to the House before, there are 800 jobs in DARD headquarters, so the intention is to move the whole of the headquarters to one site. You will be aware that I have made announcements in respect of Forest Service relocation, so there will be a number of jobs going into the Fermanagh area. I take on board the Member's welcome for the Ballykelly site and assure him that it is my intention to move the majority of those 800 jobs into Ballykelly.

Potato Farmers: Compensation

2. **Mr Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what consideration she has given to introducing a compensation programme for potato farmers who are facing crop losses due to the prolonged period of wet weather. (AQO 2783/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very aware of and sympathise with the difficulties being experienced by farmers throughout the North due to the bad weather. Unfortunately, there are currently no financial support measures available for farmers' losses due to the poor weather. Any potential for compensation funding is further severely constrained by business case requirements and compliance with restrictive EU state aid rules.

It is too early to reliably quantify losses where crops have been affected by the weather. However, where farmers have been affected, I encourage them to contact their local CAFRE adviser for assistance. My officials are monitoring the situation and have provided and

will continue to provide practical information and advice to help mitigate the risks associated with severe weather. Also, CAFRE, AFBI and the Ulster Farmers' Union will jointly run the Potatoes 2012 event at Greenmount on 28 November. That is an opportunity for growers to meet and speak with CAFRE development advisers and members of the wider industry.

In addition, I recently announced that I would reduce the amount of modulation money taken from farmers' single farm payment in 2013, making an additional €19 million, which is roughly £15 million at current exchange rates, available to farmers in their 2013 payments.

The Department has also commissioned research into additional measures that farmers can take to mitigate risk associated with extreme weather events. The findings of that research will be disseminated to farmers through CAFRE when it becomes available.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for her response. In light of the lack of compensation payment, can the Minister tell us how much financial support has been given to date through the current rural development programme in order to help and assist vegetable producers and processors?

Mrs O'Neill: I can give the Member the overall figure of £500 million for the rural development programme, but I am happy to get the Member a breakdown of the money that goes directly into the sector. It is a very important sector, and I totally take on board the fact that the weather is creating a catastrophic disadvantage to them this year. I encourage them to ask for advice and to work with our CAFRE advisers. I will continue to do all that I can to help them to mitigate the risks that are associated with bad weather. Issues that we need to explore much further include insurance for people in the sector. In the time ahead, I intend to have meetings with insurance providers to discuss that further. It would also be useful to have conversations with the Ulster Farmers' Union in that respect.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister outline which concrete steps she has taken to introduce a scheme to support potato farmers who have experienced crop losses? As she is aware, the issue was raised in the House last November by my party colleague John McCallister. Then, she offered sympathy and cited financial pressures as the reason for not supporting those farmers.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware of the current economic climate. We are in difficult financial times. The fact that the Executive face significant financial constraints, in turn, has a knock-on effect on Departments.

I will assist farmers and potato growers in every way that I can. I have outlined the type of things that we are involved in, such as the workshops, in particular, which I think people find very useful. We are also working to improve productivity and get the most out of what someone grows with the least input costs. So, we will continue to do all the work that we can. We will continue to work with the Ulster Farmers' Union and all those people because it is important to me that we maintain that sector and help it to grow. Unfortunately, at this time, financial compensation is not something for which I have the budget to be able to consider.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Can the Minister assure me that DARD is doing all it can to assist all sections of the farming community affected by bad weather?

Mrs O'Neill: It is fair to say, as I said, that the full extent of the difficulties that are being faced by the sector this year are due to issues that the House has debated on many occasions, particularly, quite recently, the fact that farm gate prices are falling and input costs are rising and the weather. So, we have to work with the industry right across the board no matter what sector we are involved with. A lot of the work that I am doing in that regard is around training events, the workshops that I talked about and access to development advisers. The provision of management tools is also important in assisting farmers to calculate the volume of fodder that they have in store, their stock demands and all those issues. We provide advice on harvest and poor harvest management of potato crops. We are also involved in a lot of work on benchmarking. Those are all practical ways in which the Department can assist all sectors throughout the farming industry.

Mr Rogers: In addition to the potato farmers, grain and fruit farmers have had an equally terrible year. Has the Minister any plans to address the problems faced by sectors of the farming industry that depend very much on feed all year round, such as the pig men and poultry men?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. We are looking at each sector and all of its needs. As part of the wider Agri-Food Strategy Board work, we have

broken that down sector by sector. We are looking at the challenges and barriers to growth for each sector and how we can work together. The grain sector is having particular problems, as it is not always feasible or attractive for a farmer to even want to start growing crops. We will continue to work with all sectors right across the board on their potential for growth in the future and the barriers that exist.

Mr Speaker: Question No 3 has been withdrawn.

Flood Alleviation: Belfast

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline her Department's plans for flood alleviation work in Belfast. (AQO 2785/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: In the aftermath of the June flooding, Rivers Agency undertook considerable work to clear debris and blockages in watercourses right across Belfast. That was in addition to the agency's ongoing inspection and maintenance programme to ensure that the main watercourse network, for which it is responsible, is functioning as effectively as possible. The agency also investigated watercourse-related flooding to determine what could be done to reduce the risk of further flooding. Where minor works were identified, many of these have been progressed. The agency is also seeking approval from the Drainage Council to take on responsibility for a number of watercourses where there are clear benefits for this work to be undertaken by government.

For my part, I am delighted to confirm that I have secured an additional £6 million for flood alleviation work to help to protect 1,700 properties in east Belfast. That will enable Rivers Agency to commit to the integration of flood alleviation work as part of the Connswater Community Greenway project and is in addition to the £5 million-worth of stand-alone work that Rivers Agency is taking forward to reduce the risk of flooding.

4.15 pm

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answer. There is, however, still a problem, particularly in south and east Belfast. The Minister referred to east Belfast, and I am grateful for that, but what remedies is she pursuing in south Belfast?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware of the ongoing discussions with the Rivers Agency about south Belfast. Some time over the next two weeks, I intend to visit sites in south Belfast to take a look at the issues for myself. A number of residents have asked me to do that, and I am happy to do so. It is about protecting people and about the Rivers Agency providing the best response in protection and flood alleviation for the future. You will be aware that we are working on schemes. I will give you an idea of the amount of spend in the greater Belfast area: about £1 million of maintenance work will be carried out over this financial year, about £200,000 of which is for upgrading facilities or constructing new ones, grilles and clearing things like that. I am happy to write to the Member with more detail on the south Belfast flood alleviation plans in particular.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. What co-ordination takes place between flooding responders to improve the flood response?

Mrs O'Neill: Co-operation and co-ordination between flooding responders is provided through a two-tier structure that includes representatives of the Rivers Agency, Roads Service, NI Water, NI Fire and Rescue Service and the local government emergency management group. The Rivers Agency chief executive chairs the flood strategy steering group, and the Rivers Agency also chairs the flood liaison group at an operational level.

The remit of the groups is to co-operate and co-ordinate with one another before, during and after any flooding event to ensure a more co-ordinated response to the public in the event of flooding. The recent co-option of the Fire and Rescue Service and the emergency planning co-ordinators who represent groups of councils is, I believe, added value. Continued improvement is expected through developing an understanding of the co-operation between the various parties.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister confirm that her Department's financial contribution through the Rivers Agency to the Belfast flood alleviation scheme is enough to allow it to perform its duties satisfactorily on an annual basis? Will she reassure us that the flood alleviation scheme is, indeed, a priority for her?

Mrs O'Neill: It was evident from my initial answer that it is a priority, given the fact that I went to DFP, made a bid and secured the £6 million necessary to carry forward the integrated element of the project. Aside from

that, another £5 million will be spent over the next number of years on the stand-alone measures that need to be taken. Obviously, it is a massive scheme, but those things will help with the process until we get the whole flood alleviation scheme and the integrated flood alleviation scheme implemented. So I have prioritised the issue. Rivers Agency believes that it needs to be prioritised, which is why we bid for the additional money.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has already been answered.

Forest Service: Relocation

6. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what progress has been made in relocating the Forest Service to Fermanagh. (AQO 2787/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: This is an important project for Forest Service. My general policy is to relocate more DARD jobs to rural areas. In the case of Forest Service, there is an added rationale for seeking to relocate its headquarters to Fermanagh, because 15% of the land area is already forest. Furthermore, we want to reach our overall target of 12% in the North, and it is a reasonable expectation that the density of forest in Fermanagh could increase to over 20% of the land area by planting in the wettest soils, which are so difficult for agriculture and so common in that county.

My view is that the senior managers and their support staff will be better informed about the issues that concern forest users, the timber industry and the Assembly if their headquarters were close to the place where most of the forests are. The chief executive of the Forest Service is assembling a team of staff to take forward that work. He has held meetings with NIPSA to address staff concerns and discuss planning of the move, which I expect to take place within the next 12 to 18 months.

A property search is being carried out for suitable premises. Some preliminary work has been done to develop a business case, which will need to include an assessment of the equality impact. I will discuss the options with the chief executive when that work is more advanced.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí dúinn. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer and for the positive news coming out of this development.

On a separate matter, given that Fermanagh has a significant number of ash trees, will the Minister update the House on the situation with the ash dieback disease? How is she attempting to control that?

Mrs O'Neill: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chomhalta as ucht a cheiste. As the Member knows, ash is a very common tree in Fermanagh, and I believe that, if the headquarters were located there, the Forest Service's effectiveness in monitoring threats and dealing with any outbreaks would improve. However, you have rightly highlighted the issue of ash dieback — chalara disease — and it is important that I update Members on where we are with that.

I am pleased to report that, following a meeting with Minister Shane McEntee last Friday, we agreed the need for additional safeguards on imports of ash wood and bark. After consulting stakeholders, we found that there were regular imports of ash logs for manufacturing purposes, mainly for hurls and firewood. That is a potential pathway for disease, and it is an unacceptable risk. Today, I authorised the making of a statutory rule, the Plant Health (Wood and Bark) (Amendment) Order, as emergency legislation. That means that, from today, ash wood can be imported only under certain technical conditions as set out in the order. I believe that that is a proportionate response to the risk of introducing disease in wood, which is greatest in the case of ash logs that have bark attached. From today, they can be imported only if they are accompanied by an official statement that the wood originates in an area known to be free of *Chalara fraxinea*. However, the risk reduces substantially if the wood receives some simple treatment. The order provides for a range of suitable treatments that will, I believe, allow manufacturers to continue to produce hurls. I am aware that the equivalent legislation has been brought in today in the Twenty-six Counties. We have very much taken a fortress Ireland approach to this issue, and it has served us well to date.

Mr Speaker: I am very conscious of the original question, and the supplementary went slightly outside that. It possibly answered Mr Sheehan's question, which is question 10, so maybe he will have some thoughts on what supplementary he might ask the Minister.

Mr Kinahan: I enjoyed listening to all that about the ash trees, as we all need to know about the issue, although maybe not at that time.

It is good to hear that a business case is being put together. However, are we looking in that business case at the extra cost that will be involved with people having to travel to Fermanagh to areas such as Tardree and others to manage the woodlands elsewhere? Alternatively, will we have local offices that may add an extra cost so that those staff can manage areas that are further away from Fermanagh?

Mrs O'Neill: There are 61 posts in the Forest Service headquarters, which are currently based in Belfast. Some of those posts are closely connected with the work that the staff do in forests, particularly those that are maybe in County Antrim, County Down or County Armagh, and they will not move to Fermanagh. However, because some are occupied by specialist staff and require specialist skills, staff are not readily available from elsewhere, so it may take time to locate them. We have 12 to 18 months ahead of us to plan properly and make sure that staff are taken with us along the way. Over time, I expect that most if not all of those jobs will eventually relocate to Fermanagh, if we are reasonably flexible about the timing and working arrangements. The Forest Service is staffed mainly with specialist staff, many of whom have family commitments in the greater Belfast area, and it is important that we take all those things into account as we develop the plans to move forward. However, I hope to be there in 12 to 18 months, and the intention is that all staff will move there at some stage after that.

Mr McCarthy: I appreciate the Minister's response to the questions on relocation. Now that she has raided all the east of the Province of all the good jobs, is there anything left at all for Strangford, or will we have to travel to Ballykelly, Fermanagh and God knows where?

Mrs O'Neill: It certainly makes a change for people to have to travel to the west to get a job. I have no interest in stripping anywhere of jobs, but we need to have a fair distribution of public sector jobs, and that is what this move is about. It leads the way, as a Department is taking its jobs to the west of the Bann. It gives us a fair distribution for economic growth, for the jobs that are available and for the opportunities for people who work in the Civil Service.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a ráiteas agus as a freagraí. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for her statement and answers. Does she have any plans to expand the Forest

Service in the Newry and Armagh constituency?

Mrs O'Neill: That is a very parochial question, but I am happy to write to the Member about it. As you know, we have a fantastic natural resource in the area, and we are always looking for further opportunities to develop it, particularly in social and recreational use, through the Forest Service. Michelle Gildernew brought forward that policy in the previous mandate. I am happy to write to the Member about any plans for expansion in the Newry and Mourne area.

Mr Speaker: Mr Lyttle is not in his place for question 8.

Ash Dieback

10. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what discussions she has had with the Irish Government in relation to the tree disease ash dieback. (AQO 2791/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Tá brón orm, Pat. I may have answered this question when I was answering Phil Flanagan's question.

As I said, we brought in emergency legislation on 26 October, and today I will bring forward further legislation. I know that you have been contacted by some people, particularly hurl manufacturers, who are concerned about the future. I assure you that I have met all stakeholders and have assured them that I am trying to find a balance between protecting our forests and our most native species, which is the ash, and being mindful of the fact that these are manufacturers who operate businesses. I think that we have found a way forward that works for everybody and makes sure that we take on board everybody's concerns. As I said, we have applied the fortress Ireland approach. It has served us well to date. I will continue to work with Minister Shane McEntee and Minister Simon Coveney in any further moves that we may need to take in the future.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Sheehan. I appreciate that the Member's thunder may have been stolen on this one.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for her answer, and I welcome her previous answer to my colleague Mr Flanagan. She alluded to the fact that a number of people on this island, particularly

hurley makers, have a livelihood that depends on the importing of ash wood. I welcome her announcement today. What steps are the Southern Government taking to eradicate the outbreak of ash dieback in County Leitrim?

Mrs O'Neill: It is regrettable, to say the least, that ash dieback has been discovered in a young ash plantation in Leitrim. I understand that it was discovered in imported plants. Surveys for planting and established ash woodland continue to be carried out as the South have introduced the emergency legislation.

As I said, the South have taken other measures: I think they have destroyed 30,000-plus ash plants to eradicate the disease. The priority is eradication. Our fortress Ireland approach then kicks in for imports that may come in from England or the rest of Europe. We will continue to operate the fortress Ireland approach and have close co-ordination at official and ministerial level across both Departments.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer. When foot-and-mouth disease came on the scene, the carcasses of the beasts were burnt. I appreciate that certain people on this side of the House might say that the right approach would be to burn the ash and therefore probably deal with the hurley stick business in a different way. That is one angle, and it is said somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Is the eradication being carried out on-site? I have been told that moving the spores of damaged trees spreads it round the country. That is what could happen, so they will have to be burnt on-site.

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that we have had no outbreaks in the North at this stage. Hopefully, we will not have to deal with it. I believe that the South burned them on-site, but I can confirm that with the Member.

What is most important is the balance between protecting our native species and protecting our important industries, such as hurl making. The hurl makers were very concerned about the implications that this would have for them, but I am confident that we have found a way forward that will allow them to continue to make hurls way into the future. Maybe the Member should go to a game, and maybe he would enjoy it. It is very much about a balanced way forward to protect the species and the industries that depend on it.

Mr Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Salmon Stocks: Foyle

12. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what action she is taking to preserve salmon stocks in the Foyle system. (AQO 2793/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: The Loughs Agency is very progressive as regards the conservation and protection of salmon in the Foyle system. There are three aspects to that work: the making of regulations; enforcement of those regulations, and freshwater habitat management. All are underpinned by best scientific advice. That approach reflects fully the resolutions and guidance from the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization.

4.30 pm

The agency has established from scientific research the optimum number of adult salmon needed for each river each year to maximise productivity. It has established targets in regulations that must be met if fishing is to be allowed. Currently, no commercial fishing is allowed, and angling is by catch and release only on the Foyle and Finn rivers. That is rigorously enforced, and poachers are prosecuted.

In parallel to regulating salmon fishing, and detecting and deterring illegal fishing, the agency seeks to boost the productivity of rivers by protecting the juvenile salmon habitat from impacts such as drainage, livestock incursion and pollution, and by restoring and enhancing their habitats by introducing spawning gravels and nursery stones, and by fencing the banks. That approach maximises the number of smolts produced.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans to buy out the remaining netting entitlements on the Foyle?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have any such plans at present. Currently, there is no legal netting of salmon on the Foyle system, and that will not be reviewed until 2016 at the earliest. I am mindful of the tradition of commercial fishing in the area and the future demands of high-quality protein such as fish. I am also mindful of the need for rural jobs. I look forward to a situation in which the abundance improves and there is an exploitation opportunity to sustain a food and recreational fishery.

Mr Speaker: Order. That ends questions to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Minister for Regional Development is stuck in traffic somewhere, so I ask the House to take its ease for a few minutes until he arrives — *[Laughter]* — at which time we will move to Department for Regional Development questions.

Regional Development

Mr Speaker: I want to say to the whole House that we will still have 30 minutes for this Question Time; we will not lose any time whatsoever. Questions 3 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Twaddell Avenue, Belfast

Mr Humphrey: I welcome the Minister to the Chamber. I wonder whether the Minister has been stuck in a traffic jam in Twaddell Avenue.

1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he will review the current road layout of Twaddell Avenue, Belfast. (AQO 2797/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Speaker, I am grateful to the House and to you for your indulgence. Members will know that I have been travelling back with others from the very sad circumstances in Cookstown, the funeral of Mr David Black. It was a very solemn and dignified occasion. I apologise to the House for my slight delay.

In answer to the question: the Member will recall my answer to his previous Assembly question concerning the road layout at Twaddell Avenue, which is designated as part of the A55, a busy and important traffic route to the north side of the city that runs through a residential area. In 2001, Roads Service implemented a traffic calming scheme on Twaddell Avenue that provided a central hatched area, incorporating right turn pockets and the provision of pedestrian refuge islands; and footway build-outs, placed strategically along the length of the road to assist pedestrian movements and to help to reduce the speed of vehicles.

Although Roads Service is aware, and it is regrettable, that there have been incidents where vehicles travelling along Twaddell Avenue have caused minor damage to door mirrors of parked vehicles, there is still no scope within the existing carriageway to provide a wider parking area and retain the benefits of

the existing road layout. To widen Twaddell Avenue would involve the relocation of kerb lines and a reduction in the size of the existing footways. It would also entail the removal of a number of mature street trees and the relocation of underground services, drainage pipes and gullies.

Mr Speaker, I am not as fit as I used to be or thought I was. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answer, and I agree absolutely that he has answered this question before. However, since then, there have been other incidents and a very serious accident on Twaddell Avenue. At peak times in the mornings and evenings, heavy duty vehicles such as lorries, buses, and so on, use that very busy thoroughfare in a built up area in a settled community. Will the Minister, his diary permitting, visit Twaddell Avenue to have a look at it at some mutually convenient time in the future? This situation is just continuing and there is no resolution.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. On the basis of generosity of spirit, I will endeavour to fulfil his request as early as possible.

Parking: Penalty Charge Notices

2. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Regional Development how the number of penalty charge notices issued in the three months since the charge increased compares with the same three-month period last year. (AQO 2798/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware that the increase from £60 to £90 in the cost of a penalty charge notice (PCN) took effect on 4 July 2012. Roads Service has advised that in the intervening period to 31 October 2012, 37,277 PCNs were issued. That represents a decrease of just over one tenth when compared with the 42,052 that were issued in the same four-month period in 2011. My Department is monitoring the impact of the fee increase on illegal parking, as well as the various types of contraventions. It is anticipated that this monitoring exercise will run for approximately 12 months, to allow for a comprehensive assessment to be completed. My Department will then carry out a statistical analysis of the results found in Northern Ireland compared to those in England and Wales, where differential penalties are in place, and in Scotland, where differential penalties are not in use.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his reply. Will he detail how that positive indication for the first six months of this year compares with the preceding year?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary. There may be various factors. I hope that the decrease indicates an increased level of compliance, but, as I say, there is a range of factors to be considered. It is not always possible to identify those immediately, and that is why the 12-month assessment will be important in analysing all the data available.

Mr Spratt: Given that 28% of clearway tickets are issued on the Lisburn Road in Belfast, 86% of them between 4.30 pm and 6.30 pm, does the Minister consider that the company carrying out the contract at present is doing so in a fair and equitable way across the entire city of Belfast?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will know, as will most Members, that the contract for that work was recently re-tendered and has been allocated. I am satisfied that the successful tender does fulfil all the necessary requirements, including increased savings to the Department on the quite substantial cost of these services.

I know that the Member has raised, on a constituency basis, the issue of a particular section of clearway. I am still assessing that particular situation and will be happy to liaise with him as we give further consideration to the questions he has raised.

4.45 pm

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister will know from my earlier questions that penalty notices are a huge issue in Enniskillen. Has there been a decrease in penalty notices in the town since the charges increased?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I do not have numbers for Enniskillen in particular. I am happy to write to the Member and give him some detailed information, but my sense is that the overall reduction will, I hope, be reflective in all parts. However, we will certainly confirm the information that he seeks.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. Minister, you have helpfully told us that you are prepared to undertake a statistical analysis to assist you in deciding

whether to introduce a two-tier penalty system. Will you tell the Assembly what factors you intend to take into account in that analysis?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for the supplementary question. Obviously, there are various factors. There is the implementation of a system that would give variations. It may well be that some of the units that are currently used would have to be adapted for that. I am happy to continue to look at measures that might improve the overall service that we seek to provide. We do not seek to punish people. Let me make it clear again that, for the company involved, there are no increased benefits for additional tickets being issued. It is not done on that basis, and the individuals who serve the tickets gain no personal benefit either. What we are trying to do is improve the flow of traffic and the management of parking. One hopes that, with greater compliance and acceptance of the rules and the code of parking, people should park properly and legally and, therefore, avoid penalty charge notices.

Mr Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn.

A5 Dual Carriageway: Derry to Strabane

4. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister for Regional Development when work will commence on the A5 section between the Derry City Council area and Strabane. (AQO 2800/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Work on the A5 western transport corridor between New Buildings and Ballymagorry and between Omagh and Ballygawley was due to start in October but has been delayed due to a legal challenge. In order to mitigate the impact of delays associated with the legal challenge, the contractors have been instructed to carry out preliminary works, which include ground investigation, ecology works and service diversions. That work is ongoing. However, it is not possible to say when the main construction contract works will commence, as that will be dependent on the timing and outcome of the legal challenge.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer. Further to that, how much money is being lost to his Department as a result of that delay?

Mr Kennedy: The Member will be aware, as has been previously indicated, that the clock is now running on those delays. Any delay will certainly result in increased costs in a number

of areas. Assuming that there is no change in the total construction period, there will be direct, quantified inflationary increases arising from month-on-month delays to the start of construction. The project team will attempt to mitigate the impact of any delay. However, the initial assessment of the impact of a delay to the starting date is in the order of £700,000 to £750,000 a month. Of course, the postponement of the scheduled start date will result in the Department having to declare back to the Northern Ireland block approximately £10 million for every month of delay.

Ferry Services

5. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the subvention of ferry services at Strangford, Rathlin Island and Magilligan. (AQO 2801/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department operates the Strangford lough ferry and secures the provision of the Rathlin ferry service under article 99 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993. The Lough Foyle ferry service, which operates between Magilligan and Greencastle, does not fall within the ambit of that legislation and does not receive financial assistance from my Department.

The Strangford lough ferry service is directly provided by Roads Service. The ferry is operated by Roads Service staff, with specialist marine work undertaken through an external contractor. Overall running costs vary from year to year, depending on the amount of maintenance work required by the vessels at annual refits. Almost all the maintenance work carried out is deemed essential in order to retain Maritime and Coastguard Agency certification. Roads Service has advised that, for 2011-12, the total subsidy equated to around £1 million, excluding notional costs.

The Department provides a subsidy to the Ballycastle to Rathlin Island ferry service. The amount of annual subsidy paid is in the order of £600,000, which equates to just under £8 per trip. I remain fully committed to the continued provision of ferry services to Rathlin, and I am working with the residents to improve island life, including developing an action plan agreed across a range of government entities.

Mr Hazzard: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Has the Minister considered a subvention for the Magilligan to Greencastle ferry, considering that it has carried more than three million passengers in recent years, or, indeed, the possibility of a bridge at Strangford, considering

the millions of pounds that go into the ferry service there each year?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. The Department has not carried out a feasibility study on the building of a bridge across Strangford lough. It is envisaged that the cost of such a scheme would be extremely high. The likely cost of an aesthetically acceptable bridge, spanning the narrowest part of Strangford lough, would be in excess of £300 million. If the Member wants to put forward such a proposal, well and good, but this estimate is based on the cost of recently constructed suspension bridges. Given that the subsidy to the ferry service amounts to around £1 million a year, a bridge would not be considered an economically viable solution at this time.

There is no legislative basis for the Department to provide financial support for the type of service that runs from Magilligan to Greencastle. Therefore, at this stage, there are no plans to change that position.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for the part of his answer that related to the Rathlin ferry. Obviously, it is important that that ferry continues to operate in a way that benefits, first and foremost, the people who live on the island, and, secondly, those who wish to visit. Will he tell the House what information he has about an ongoing dispute between Rathlin Ferries Ltd and a pension company?

Mr Speaker: The Member must finish his question.

Mr Storey: Has he had any discussions with Rathlin Ferries Ltd about that issue, given that it was in the ombudsman's report back in August 2012?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. He will realise that this is a somewhat delicate matter and that I am not at liberty to go into substantial detail. I understand that discussions are ongoing between my Department and the operators, and I hope that we can get the matter resolved.

Mr Dallat: The Minister said that there are no plans to change the legislation that would allow funding for the Magilligan ferry service, which is the same line as was taken by his predecessor, Mr Murphy. However, surely the Minister would agree with me that, in this day and age of the new Europe that we live in, he should at least engage in discussions with his counterpart in Dublin with a view to having joint funding for

that service, which is so important for filling empty beds on the Causeway Coast and other parts of Northern Ireland.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am, of course, always willing to explore funding opportunities to see how we can improve services. I will simply say that the current legislative basis for the Department is not in place. The harbours legislation does not allow the grant-aiding of shipping, which is a reserved matter. The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 allows subsidy to be paid to the road ferry services in Northern Ireland, namely Strangford to Portaferry and Rathlin to Ballycastle, but it cannot be used to support services that go outside Northern Ireland. That is the current legal position. However, we can potentially explore whether there are opportunities, possibly through Europe or with the Irish Republic.

Mr Kinahan: What discussions has the Minister had with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development about her Department taking responsibility for Rathlin?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am very pleased and proud to be the Executive representative with responsibility for Rathlin. I have enjoyed the three visits that I have paid to Rathlin as Minister. I think that I have developed a very good working relationship with the islanders and the islanders' forum. Other Departments may well feel that they have a more direct input, and I am happy to listen to those representations. I have not had any serious discussion with the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, I have to say that I will not let Rathlin go easily.

Roads: Gritting

7. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much money has been set aside for the 2012-13 road-gritting programme for the South Antrim constituency. (AQO 2803/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his question. Roads Service does not hold information on its winter service programme on a constituency basis. Roads that are included in the Roads Service gritting schedule in the South Antrim constituency are treated from its Antrim depot in the northern division and from its Newtownabbey and Carrickfergus and Lisburn and Castlereagh depots in the eastern division. That said, I will say that each division

retains client responsibility for all salting routes that are within its geographical boundary when, for example, providing reports to the roads incident desk or handling complaints and queries about the provision of winter service operations.

Application of the current policy ensures that just over one quarter of the total road network, which carries around eight tenths of traffic, is salted. This year, Roads Service has allocated £5.9 million to the winter service across its four divisions. Bids for additional funds for that service can be made by all divisions through the in-year bidding process. If costs over and above £5.9 million are incurred and in-year bids are unsuccessful, reductions in other maintenance activities will be required, for example, in road patching, bridge maintenance or other traffic maintenance activities. I must emphasise to the Member that, depending on the severity of the winter conditions, those allocations may change.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that it might be difficult to extrapolate that information right down to constituency level. However, representations have been made to many of us about the provision of grit boxes. There seems to be an inconsistency in the way that the policy is applied across the Province, as it seems to be more stringent in some areas than in others. It can be difficult to get grit boxes in locations where public representatives deem them necessary.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I understand his point about his constituents. For information purposes, I will say that there are 11 gritting routes in the Antrim section and 114 in Northern Ireland overall. Those are reviewed regularly to ensure compliance with Roads Service winter service policy. In general, Roads Service salts main through routes carrying more than 250 vehicles a day, although, in exceptional circumstances, other roads carrying fewer vehicles will also be salted.

5.00 pm

The application of the policy ensures that just over a quarter of the total road network, which carries about four fifths of the traffic, is salted. However, I stress that it is applied consistently on a Province-wide basis. I will endeavour to find out the number of grit piles to give the Member some comfort, because I sense that he is not completely convinced by the answer he has received. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs: Will the Minister advise us of how much salt is in storage and is available to Roads Service in the northern divisional area, which serves south Antrim and east Antrim? How does that amount of salt compare with the amount that is normally stored?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will be pleased to hear that the Antrim section salt barn at the Rathmore depot has been replenished and is full to capacity with 5,700 tons of salt. The northern division has 36,289 tons of salt in stock, including 10,953 tons in the strategic reserve. The average winter in the division requires about 22,000 tons of salt, but the severe winter of 2009-2010 required approximately 36,000 tons, so stocks should be sufficient for the incoming winter. The eastern division has 14,382 tons of salt in stock plus a resilience stock of 3,500 tons.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his responses so far. Are there arrangements between his Department and our local councils to ensure that the footpaths in our town centres are gritted during severe weather?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, and he raises a very important point. I am very pleased that, since taking responsibility for this Department, we have been able to engage with local government and our colleagues in the various councils. Some 23 of the 26 councils are signed up to a memorandum of understanding with us. However, it is fair to say that it is simply not possible or economically viable to salt every road and footpath. So, a degree of prioritisation has been established between Roads Service and the other agencies and local government. That has the prospect to ease some of the problems that can emerge in any harsh winter conditions.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Fair Employment Tribunal: Dr Alan Lennon

9. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he has sought further legal advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office in light of the alleged ineligibility of the panel member on Dr Alan Lennon's tribunal hearing. (AQO 2805/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I have taken legal advice on this live tribunal case as a matter of course. As the

tribunal hearing has not concluded, I consider the matter to be sub judice. So, I will not comment further on any advice I have received or on the proceedings before the tribunal.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr McLaughlin to ask his supplementary question, I remind Members that the sub judice rule in Standing Orders applies to tribunal hearings. The tribunal is very much active in the case of Dr Alan Lennon. I ask the Member and the whole House to be cautious. I will allow him to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I observed that the Minister was very much out of breath when he arrived, but I thought that he would have recovered by now. I thank him for his brief answer.

Despite the ongoing proceedings, the Minister managed to decide that he would not appeal. Without interfering whatsoever with the issue that the Speaker has quite correctly drawn to our attention, will the Minister explain to the House how it is possible to demonstrate that that pre-emptive decision is based on the best and most up-to-date information and represents value for money in any way?

Mr Kennedy: I refer the Member to the reply that I gave earlier.

A32 Irvinestown to Enniskillen

10. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on his Department's plans to upgrade the A32 from Irvinestown to Enniskillen. (AQO 2806/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: First, I should advise the Member that the focus of the strategic road improvement programme in the current Budget period to 2015 is on the delivery of the A8, A5 and A2 dual carriageway schemes. Roads Service has identified a number of improvement schemes along the A32 Omagh to Enniskillen route that have been prioritised in affordability, buildability and value for money. The scheme at Drumskinny is now complete, and the scheme at Shannaragh, which has an overall scheme cost of £7.3 million, is ongoing and scheduled for completion in March 2013. Together, these schemes will improve the quality of the route, enhance road safety and reduce travel times. Design work is also well advanced on two further schemes along the route at Cornamuck and Esker Bog. With regard to the section of the A32 between Irvinestown and Enniskillen, a scheme at Kilgortnaleague — I think that my officials put these names in deliberately —

[Laughter.] — has been identified as a priority. However, progression will be subject to satisfactory completion of the statutory processes and the availability of funding in future budgetary settlements.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The good people of each one of those townlands will be delighted at the Minister's attempts to pronounce them. The Minister mentioned the work that is going on in the three strategic dual carriageways. How the people of Fermanagh would love a dual carriageway. Are we any closer to reaching the stage where the proposed bypass at Enniskillen gets down to being a preferred route, moving on from being a preferred corridor?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, hopefully, I was able to pronounce those accurately without the use of any signage. The proposal for an Enniskillen bypass is something that I, as Minister, want to carry forward. Let me give that clear commitment. Obviously, we are in financially straitened times, and it is dependent on the budgetary settlements in the coming years. I have sought to carry forward as quickly as possible the Enniskillen bypass project and schemes such as the A26, Millennium Way, the Magherafelt bypass and a host of others in which Members will be interested for constituency reasons. I want to make those projects as shovel ready as we possibly can. I am conscious of the benefit that they could have for the construction industry, particularly the road construction industry. In recent days, unfortunately, we have been hearing of increased problems in the construction industry. All Members will be concerned about that, so if there are road-building projects that we can bring forward, I, as Minister, want to do that.

Comber Greenway

11. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Regional Development what consideration has been given to an extension of the greenway or the provision of cycle lanes to connect with the Belfast and County Down Railway bed running between Comber and Newtownards. (AQO 2807/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: The greenway is a seven-mile traffic-free section of the national cycle network developed by Sustrans, in partnership with Roads Service, along the route of the former Belfast to Comber railway line. The path was completed in November 2008 and provides a tranquil green corridor all the way from Comber to the heart of east Belfast. It continues to

prove extremely popular with both cyclists and walkers. I understand that although stretches of disused rail trackbed remain between Comber and Newtownards, portions of this route, which may have allowed an extension of the greenway scheme through Comber and on to Newtownards, have been built upon, leaving very few off-road sections available for use as a cycle route.

I am aware that discussions are continuing between my Department's officials and other parties, including local MLAs, councillors, Sustrans and Down Rural Area Partnership staff, to look at options to extend the Greenway scheme into Comber town centre. It has been acknowledged by this group that funding would need to be sourced from a variety of partner organisations to realise such a scheme. Unfortunately, under current funding levels, this proposal would likely attract a low priority for Roads Service when assessed and compared with other potential transportation schemes competing for the limited funding available. Therefore, Roads Service is unable to consider an extension of the greenway cycle path from Comber to Newtownards.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments as we move to the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Voting Age

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

Ms Fearon: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that the voting age should be reduced to 16 for all elections and referendums; and calls on the Westminster Government to introduce legislation to accommodate this change.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We have an opportunity today to send a message of inclusion to young people who are disenfranchised from the political system. Decisions are made every day that impact heavily on young people and many of those decisions will have a long-term impact on their future, yet they have no say in who represents them. I fully support the motion. I encourage others in the Chamber to get behind the 16- and 17-year-olds who are denied the right to vote. Representatives across the board need to wake up and recognise the widening gap between them and their younger electorate.

Much more must be done to engage with this sector of society, and it is absolutely vital that young people have the basic democratic right to vote. Personally, I have been extremely politically active and politically aware since my early teens, but I was only entitled to vote three years ago. I want to ensure that young people are given a greater say. The argument that older people know what is best for young people and would vote accordingly was used to deny women the vote in the 1900s, and it is as wrong now as it was then.

At the minute, there are many issues coming through the Assembly that relate specifically to young people; for example, the future of the education maintenance allowance (EMA). That is an issue that affects only those under the age of 18, yet they are denied the opportunity to elect policymakers. The voting age should be lowered to 16 so that young people can have a direct influence on who is elected to make

those decisions. Young people are repeatedly stereotyped in the media and other outlets. It is said that young people are not interested in politics and are not mature enough to vote. There has been much talk recently about voter apathy and a lack of interest in society about politics, particularly among young people. This is simply not true. Young people are now more politicised than ever. The world is a much smaller place than it was when many of the people in this Chamber were 16. Global connections can be made at the touch of a button.

Sinn Féin believes that a dynamic could be created by lowering the voting age. It could open up new ideas, challenge old, bad practice and banish the myth that young people are not interested. I have heard this question asked before: can we trust 16- and 17-year-olds to vote? That question is irrelevant and, quite frankly, patronising. It implies that younger people do not have the capabilities to make an informed decision. We have to accept that young people are intelligent, rational and articulate individuals. At 16, you can consider your career prospects and your educational future; enter into full-time work; become liable to pay tax and national insurance; give consent to medical treatment; consent to sexual relationships; and get married. At 17, young people are trusted to acquire a driving licence and to drive on public roads, but we cannot trust them to vote. This argument has no merit. That is one of the biggest responsibilities that anyone, at any age, can have. At the very point that society expects young people to assume many of these responsibilities, it is only right that they also get the right to vote. Not only are 16- and 17-year-olds able by law to make complex decisions and take on a wide range of responsibilities, but they are showing in practice that they want to make a positive difference. Locking young people out relies only on outdated views about their capacity.

As things stand, there are almost 50,000 16- and 17-year-olds in the North who are being denied the vote. It is the responsibility of all of us to get young people interested in the democratic process. We cannot, on the one hand, say that we are interested in young people's issues and, on the other, refuse them access to the ballot box until they are 18. In countries where the voting age has been lowered, younger voters have shown a higher turnout than older demographics. It is time that all elections and referendums on the island of Ireland are made equally open to young people. It is vital that we include young people in the political process as early as we can so that we

can lay the foundations for future political engagement.

The motion should be a motion of confidence in the younger generation, and I urge everyone here to support it. I say this to those who do not: it only shows a fear of becoming irrelevant and a worry about how a young and increasingly liberal population will choose to use its vote. I cannot help but notice that a huge reason for political detachment is the very make-up of the Chamber. There is a very real perception in the community that the Chamber is male and middle-aged and too much so. It is time for change. I urge everyone to support the motion.

5.15 pm

Mr Ross: "It is time for change" is a particularly appropriate term to use today when the people of America are choosing what kind of change they want — the kind of change from four years ago or a new change. It is important to have today's debate. It is an issue that the Member, obviously, as the youngest Member of the House, has been lobbied pretty heavily on. I used to be one of the younger Members of the House. I was never particularly supportive of the concept of 16-year-olds voting. I have still not come round to that point of view, and I have not been convinced by the arguments that have been put forward so far that we should move towards that position.

Most people in the House would agree that voting is a huge responsibility. It is also a privilege that we all have in a democratic society. We want to make sure that our voters are —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: Already; yes, of course.

Mr D Bradley: Does the Member agree that it is a little more than a touch ironic that one of the parties proposing the motion does not take its seats in Westminster. Were the issue to come before Westminster, it would not be in a position to vote for it. Would the proposer of the motion not be better spending her time trying to encourage those who could have a vote to take that vote and exercise it?

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

Mr Ross: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. On this and a number of other issues that can effect change at Westminster, I think that it

would be important that all those elected to Westminster should take their seats. I do not think that that will come as any surprise to the Member.

The people who are involved in the votes-at-16 movement are clearly well educated and well motivated and take an interest in the political process. I do not think that there is any doubt about that. Indeed, many of us will have received correspondence from the organisations supporting it. However, I do not think that that can be said of the vast majority of 16-year-olds across the country. Indeed, I do not think that every 16-year-old will be watching proceedings today with a huge degree of interest.

The fact is that, right across the world, 18 is the age at which voting tends to happen. I think that there are 142 countries where voters must be 18. We have a handful of countries where people can vote below that age: North Korea is one where the age is 17; in Brazil and Nicaragua, it is 16; and in Iran, it is 15. I suggest, though, that the elections in North Korea and Iran do not make an awful lot of difference. However, the fact that, across the world, 18 is the age that is generally accepted, shows that it is the age at which most societies believe that a young person becomes an independent-thinking adult.

Ms Ruane: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I will, if it is very brief.

Ms Ruane: Thank you. Go raibh maith agat. I understand that the Member's party is opposed to voting at 16. Will he explain whether his party is united in that? We are given to understand that one of his MPs supports voting at 16. Is that a united position?

Mr Ross: I think that Members are able to hold their own individual views on this. I do not think that that would be unique. The Assembly party here is united in the view that it does not believe in voting at 16. I do not think that it can be much clearer than that.

The proposer listed a number of things that people can do —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I am not going to give way, because I am running out of time.

The proposer listed a number of things that you can do at 16, but that on its own is not an

argument to reduce the voting age. I could list a number of things that you cannot do at 16. You cannot drive; you cannot drink alcohol; you cannot smoke tobacco; and you cannot rent out films such as 'RoboCop' or 'Trainspotting'. You cannot even play computer games such as 'Resident Evil'. The reason why society has said that you cannot do that is because of protection. Indeed, it is somewhat ironic that some of the individuals in the House who will argue to give 16-year-olds more responsibility by allowing them to vote are the very people who also argued for and supported raising the smoking age to 18 and want to have further restrictions on young drivers and drinkers for their own safety. There is somewhat of an irony there.

Perhaps the clearest example is jury duty. You cannot do jury duty until you are 18. I do not think that many Members in the House would advocate having 16-year-olds serving on juries.

One of the other arguments that has been advanced is that young people are affected by decisions taken at Parliament Buildings or at Westminster. That is absolutely correct. However, there are younger children who are also impacted by decisions taken by politicians. Such issues as childcare policy and post-primary transfer policy relate to young people, regardless of whether they are four, five, six, 14, 15 or 16. Therefore, it is not a good enough argument to say that decisions taken here impact on 16-year-olds, so they should be able to vote. I think that any party worth its measure should be listening to the views of young people, regardless of whether they can vote.

The other argument that was advanced by the Member was that —

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ross: I cannot; I only have 50 seconds left, and the Speaker will not give me any more extra time.

The final argument that was advanced was that this measure will increase young people's participation in the political process. Although the Member said that that is the case where voting age is reduced to 16, there is no evidence of that. If we look at the Isle of Man, where the voting age was reduced to 16 in February 2006, we can see that only half of those eligible to vote actually registered to vote, and fewer than that turned out to vote at elections. So there is no evidence at all to suggest that this will increase any participation or connection between young people and the political parties.

That said, I think that it is important that political parties do all they can to ensure that they engage with young people. I do not think that it is necessary to change the law and allow younger people to vote, but it is important that politicians and political parties try to engage with young people, —

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

Mr Ross: — listen to the concerns, listen to the issues that are important to them and reflect on them, because you have to be a political representative for all the people in your constituency, not only those who can vote.

Mr Beggs: The Member who has just spoken indicated that harm would befall a young person, and, for that reason, they were not allowed to smoke or drink, but he did not explain what harm would befall them if they voted. I did not hear any explanation there. Surely, every democrat must be concerned —

Mr Ross: I thank the Member for giving way. The point that I was making is that there are Members in the House who are arguing that young people are not responsible enough to take decisions about practices that will harm their own health. It is something that I have heard the Member's colleagues argue for before. It is about that sort of level of individual responsibility. Some Members say that young people do not have enough individual responsibility to smoke or to drink, but they think that they have that individual responsibility to vote. That is the contradiction that I was highlighting.

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

Mr Beggs: Every democrat should be concerned about declining voter turnouts. Without a healthy level of participation in elections, any body will have difficulty in claiming legitimacy. I first stood for election in 1998, when there was a 70% turnout in Northern Ireland. In just 13 years since that, there has been a 14% decline in the Assembly electorate. One in five of those who were voting have stopped voting. That must be of concern to everyone, and we must change that decline. I am particularly concerned by the most recent European election, where there was only a 43% turnout.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: I have already given way.

In the east of the Province, there were six constituencies in which fewer than four in 10 electors chose to cast their vote. I am talking about East Belfast, East Antrim, South Antrim, Lagan Valley, North Down and Strangford. Several of them had a turnout of less than 35%. That must be of concern.

I thank the Assembly research staff for their information packs, which I found very useful. In particular, they contain information regarding a recent House of Commons information booklet. There are some useful facts in it. In 2001, a MORI poll estimated that 39% of 18- to 24-year-olds voted, compared with 70% of those aged 65. We have an increasing population, and we are finding that the younger population are not voting. That is not good. We need to change that decline.

In 2003, the Electoral Commission stated that there were clear signs of public disengagement with voting, particularly among the youngest section of the electorate, in which fewer than four out of 10 18- to 24-year-olds were estimated to have voted in the most recent general election. Interestingly, it went on to say that an estimated 11% voted in the English local government elections. What will become of us in the future if we do not try to take action to change that decline?

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beggs: Certainly.

Mr Hussey: I am sure that you listened intently to Mr Ross's comments regarding the support that the DUP is not going to give to the motion. Would you be surprised to know that, in 2005, the then MP Peter Robinson signed an early day motion in favour of 16-year-olds voting?

Mr Beggs: I am aware that a number of its other MPs signed motions. Perhaps it makes a difference when it does not have an input in the ultimate decision. Ultimately, this decision has to be made at Westminster. We need to send a clear signal to Westminster. Now that there has been agreement to give this power to Scotland, I would argue that it would be hard not to give it to Northern Ireland.

Another important aspect is that citizenship training is now happening in our schools. Our young people are being taught about our elected bodies, the importance of voting and how it works. However, what happens at present is that they are given the information

and, come the age of 16, many leave school and face a minimum of two years before they have an opportunity to exercise their vote. They forget what they learned at school before they have had a chance to exercise it. How much better would it be if, having gone through citizenship training at school, young people were presented with the chance to exercise their vote at the next election and so participate? The habits learned in our younger years tend to follow through to our latter years. It is vital that we encourage more people to get out and vote. That is also the view of the Power Commission, which was established by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. It was very concerned with why people were disengaged from politics and how that could be rectified. Recommendation 16 in its 'Power to the People' report, published in February 2006, was that the voting age "should be reduced to sixteen". This is not rocket science.

I may come at the issue from a different angle and perspective from other unionists who oppose it and are somehow fearful of empowering young people. In Carrickfergus, through the youth education social inclusion programme (YESIP), peer research went on among young people, who were supported by the YMCA. My experience was that I was one of a group of adults who provided some background information, guidance and advice. Ultimately, however, the young people made the decisions. I found them to be a very mature group of young people who appreciated the difficult decisions that often have to be made. They were aware of how you have to gather the facts and argue your case. That group was successful in getting some funding and set up a YESIP information point café for young people. Regrettably, that funding has now come to an end. It is vital that we empower our young people and encourage them —

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

Mr Beggs: — to exercise their vote. The Assembly must give a clear message: let us empower young people to vote.

Mr Eastwood: First, it is very good that the motion has come to the House. I am somewhat surprised at the DUP's position given, as Mr Hussey outlined, its leader's position. He is a Member of the House and a member of your Assembly team, Mr Ross. Even though you said that your Assembly team was united, your leader, Mr Robinson, signed an early day motion supporting this very proposal. I hope that you will go and talk to him after this, or

maybe before the debate is over. Maybe you will have to change your mind.

The motion is a very good one. There are obviously some well-rehearsed arguments for why young people between the ages of 16 and 18 should be allowed to vote. They can get married and go off to fight in wars in Afghanistan, Iraq or anywhere in the world, but they do not get an opportunity to vote for the Government who might send them to Afghanistan, where they might end up losing their life in defence of their country.

The value of widening the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds is much more than just a rights issue. It is about the political process engaging with young people, which I think we are very bad at. Evidence from other countries shows that if you get young people voting from age 16, they form the habit and tend to vote for the rest of their life.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: I will give way if you are prepared to explain your leader's position.

Mr Ross: The Member will give way for what I am going to ask him.

The reality is that those between the ages of 18 and 24 can vote, but they have the lowest turnout in election after election. I do not follow the argument made by Mr Beggs and you, which is that reducing the voting age to 16 will somehow increase participation among the youngest voters in society. Should we not concentrate first on ensuring that we get a higher turnout of voters between the ages of 18 and 24 before we even considering widening the vote to 16-year-olds? Other Members argue that we would get their engagement, but there is no evidence to suggest that we would.

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

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

You have not answered my question, Mr Ross, but I will attempt to answer yours. It is clear that if young people begin to vote at an earlier age and are encouraged to do so while learning about citizenship and politics at school, they will tend to vote for longer, get into the habit and understand its importance.

5.30 pm

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: Yes, I will.

Mr Hussey: Do you find it strange that a party that has the word "democratic" at the beginning of its name — the Democratic Unionist Party — is not prepared to widen democracy?

Mr Eastwood: I find a lot of things strange about the Democratic Unionist Party.

I think that the point is very well made. If young people are able to go and fight wars that some Members might support, they should be entitled to vote for the Government who will send them there. I am fed up hearing politicians say that young people are apathetic and not interested in politics. I often speak to young people, as, I am sure, do many Members, and I find that they are far from apathetic. They are very interested in many issues, but, in a lot of cases, one thing that they are not interested in is how this political process and these political bodies engage with them and attempt to encourage them to become involved in politics. That is a failure on our part. Every one of us has a responsibility to ensure that young people engage with this type of politics.

Young people think very carefully and very clearly and are passionate about many issues that affect them and others not only in this country but around the world. We have failed young people if they are not voting from the ages of 18 to 24. We have not excited them, and we have not engaged with them. Every one of us has an opportunity to do that going forward. What better opportunity to do that than to begin the process at age 16 and allow those people, whose lives are affected very seriously by politicians not only in this House but in other places, to have an opinion and have their voice heard? I do not think that there should be any problem with that. This is an opportune time to begin a relationship with democracy for 16- and 17-year-olds. Nobody in the House should be afraid of that.

I try to engage as much as I can with young people, but, if they are not even entitled to use their vote, when we ask them to do many other things, what kind of confidence are we showing in them today? There are not many DUP Members here, but I plead with those who are to use their franchise today and to vote to support the extension of the franchise to 16- and 17-year-olds. Hopefully, between now and the time of the vote, you can call Peter and ask him whether he has changed his mind; I do not know whether he has.

Mr Dickson: Having the vote is one of the most important rights in a democracy. Therefore, the age at which people can vote is a significant democratic and political issue. The Alliance Party believes that the voting age should be reduced to 16 for all elections. After all, Members will have heard on numerous occasions the slogan "No taxation without representation". The clearest argument that we can see for such a change is not the arguments that have been made in the House today but the basic and very simple principle that, if you pay taxation, you have a right to representation and a say in that representation. That clearly comes at the age of 16 when, if you are in employment, you have to pay income tax.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr Ross: Is the Member arguing that 16-year-olds who stay in education and do not pay taxes should be able to vote?

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

Mr Dickson: No, that clearly is not the argument that I am making. Many pensioners and others do not pay tax. However, when people have reached a certain point, the principle is applied in the round, which means that 16-year-olds who pay tax have a right to representation and to a say in that representation. If you are old enough to work full time and pay taxes, it is fair to have a say in how that money is spent and to have the opportunity to hold to account those who make policy decisions about the spending of that money.

I ask Members how they would feel if they were 16, working full time and paying taxes, with a real interest in politics and a desire to have a say in how tax on their hard-earned income and wages is spent but were unable to do so. I am glad to see that at least some Members of the party that is espousing opposition today, including another of its MPs, are here. Maybe this is cynical — I do not know, Mr Deputy Speaker — but some sign early day motions and others take publicity opportunities to ensure that they are seen to support voting at 16.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I will.

Mr Swann: I am just conscious that it will not be recorded in Hansard that you actually held up a photograph of Ian Paisley Jnr. *[Laughter.]* The Northern Ireland Youth Forum tweeted on 19 October 2012 that Ian Paisley Jnr is happy to go on the record as being in favour of voting at 16, although his party is agnostic about it. I am not sure whether that is the Assembly party, the entire party or just the members who are not really sure at this moment in time.

Mr Dickson: Those who champion democracy cannot and should not stand over such a situation. Whether 16- and 17-year-olds are denied the vote is not widely regarded to be as serious an issue as, for example, the historical denial of votes to women and other groups in society. Maybe, the DUP would have agreed with those who denied the vote to women by describing them as being feeble-minded. Maybe, the DUP believes that 16-year-olds are feeble-minded. That is what people said about women, who were denied the opportunity to vote.

If the arguments against lowering the voting age are found to be weak or unconvincing, the exclusion of a particular section of the public from voting has to be taken very seriously. The maturity of 16- and 17-year-olds is an issue for many who are opposed to any change. Of course, questions of maturity are important. Ideally, we want citizens to be properly engaged, but, as my colleague from East Antrim Mr Beggs said, citizenship is part of the curriculum with knowledge of the political system and an understanding of the nature and significance of the issues that are the subject of public and political debate. If we take such logic to its natural conclusion, then we must ask whether citizens who are 18, 40, 50 or 62 years old are equally mature to make decisions. Can we honestly say that all citizens currently entitled to vote have the same understanding? We cannot, and so that argument must not be used to justify denying 16- and 17-year-olds the right to vote.

Another argument put forward against the change is that extending voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds will not lead to a significant increase in the number of people who vote. That may be the situation, but, although others have said that it is, this is not an issue of increasing the number of people who vote. That is not why I support 16- and 17-year-olds being able to vote. I do so because it is the right democratic thing to do. If it encourages more people to vote, that is a good outcome, but it is not the principal reason for supporting the vote for 16- and 17-year-olds. None of us knows for certain whether such an extension

would lead to a significant increase in the number of people who vote. We need to consider and implement measures that deal with political disengagement. If extending the vote encourages people to engage with politics at a younger age, everyone in the Chamber should agree with me that that is a good thing. If it did not have such an effect, that would be disappointing. However, it is certainly not a reason to deny politically active 16-year-olds their democratic rights.

Many of us have received letters from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and other youth groups. We cannot deny that there are young people who are passionate about politics. Today, I received six or seven postcards in the mail, and I can expect to receive more following the debate this evening. We have an opportunity to demonstrate to those young people that we respect their views as valid and we regard them as citizens who are equal to the rest of us. I urge Members in the House to support the motion. Let us send a message to our colleagues at Westminster, who have the decision-making powers. Yet again, I challenge Sinn Féin, and this comment has been made: why do you not go and use your vote and stand up for what you are preaching in this House today?

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I would like to begin by thanking my party colleague Megan Fearon and the Green Party's Steven Agnew for tabling the motion. It has been highly anticipated by large sections of society for a few years now. It is great that we finally have the opportunity to address one feature of the demographic deficit that exists in our political system.

One of the early mantras of progressive political discourse at the outset of the American revolution was "No taxation without representation". Perhaps, it is fitting, on the day that US citizens go to the polls, that progressive political discourse is echoing that same historical disdain for demographic deficits. Our mantra is similar: no taxation without participation. Participation is at the very heart of the motion. I have little doubt that today's debate and the ongoing work being done by various youth forums and Comhairle na nÓg throughout Ireland will be the catalyst for a more progressive and participatory democracy in years to come. That is vital.

For decades, political establishments throughout much of the world have been manoeuvring political power away from participatory models of democratic accountability, as large-scale apathy and

disillusionment with the political system has come to characterise much of what democracy stands for today. In some recent instances, such as in Egypt, the demand for participatory democracy was so intense that the political elite did not even have the time for adequate reform before it was too late. Indeed, Tahrir Square demonstrated to political establishments throughout the world that deficits in the democratic system will always be filled at a later date, not always as intended. We need to recognise the shortcomings of our political system and address the grievances of the disenfranchised. Today's motion is certainly not opportunistic or in any way demagogic, so it is disappointing that we have once again had the same burst of —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hazzard: Go ahead.

Mr Dickson: The Member referred to the disenfranchised. Surely all the people who voted for your Members of Parliament are disenfranchised because of your failure to represent them in that House to vote on this and other important issues.

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

Mr Hazzard: I thank the Member for his intervention. I remind him that that is one of the main reasons why large numbers of people vote for us. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Hazzard: Today's motion is certainly not opportunistic or in any way demagogic, so it is disappointing that we have once again had the same burst of reactionary paroxysm from the usual pulpits across the way.

We have only to look at some of the daily activities of most 16- and 17-year-olds to highlight the absurdity of the current electoral situation. Our 16- and 17-year-olds are expected to make decisions on their future career path, and they show huge maturity by learning to drive, balancing hobbies and sporting commitments with their education and setting up bank accounts to support their part-time employment and, indeed, fund their travels throughout much of the world. Our young adults at 16 and 17 are just as rational, intuitive and articulate as their 18- and 19-year-old siblings, yet they must remain silent on polling day. They watch elected representatives make decisions every day on matters that affect their

future, be it EMA, corporation tax, education reforms, welfare cuts or even the decision by various Governments to go to war. Are we really saying that a 16- or 17-year-old is mentally able to lift a beret and a gun but not a pencil and a ballot? It is not just about capability. Young people rely on public services such as transport, schools and hospitals, and yet they have no influence over the policies that affect their functioning.

I am not saying that reducing the voting age to 16 will be the great panacea for political apathy in an emerging generation, but I have no doubt that it can be a powerful catalyst in commencing a process of renewed participation. The progressive argument is starting to prevail throughout large parts of the world. Recently, we have seen Argentina and Scotland join political systems in Latin America and Europe in widening electoral suffrage to include 16- and 17-year-olds. There is finally an acceptance that it will be our young people who will lead real and valuable change in years to come. The decades of cronyism and golden circle politics must be banished to the past, for it is the young — even the unborn — who will eventually pay for this democratic deficit. There are tens of thousands of young adults across the North who want to participate in our political system. It is vital that we open the door to that progressive development.

I again refer to our friends across the sea. Abraham Lincoln once aspired to:

"government of the people, by the people, for the people".

Indeed, his Gettysburg address has become the definition of wide, true democratic participation. Yet, some in the House would prefer government of some of the people, by a few of the people, for their people. Our young adults in Ireland would put some of the political dinosaurs in this House to shame. I look forward to the day when young vibrant members of our society play their part in building a progressive and prosperous future for us all. I support the motion.

5.45 pm

Mr Weir: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I first want to apologise to the House because, at the end of my speech, I will have to return directly to the Assembly Commission meeting that I have just come from. I mean no discourtesy to the House.

In many ways, this is a difficult issue. If the test for the voting age is, as the previous Member who spoke said, the impact of government policy on individuals, there is an equal argument for giving the vote to those aged 12, 11, eight or whatever, because government policies on education or any issue affect everyone in society, irrespective of age. It is clearly the case that people develop at different rates, so there is a strong argument for saying that, although someone may be mature enough at 14, others may not be until they are 19 or 20.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I do not really have the time.

When faced with a difficult issue, we have to reach an objective, rational position. The easy way out, which a number in the Chamber seem to have gone down, is, when faced with a campaign, simply to agree to it. However, we have to take the courageous decision to say that we look at the facts and come to a reasonable conclusion. Can I say —

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: OK, I will give way briefly.

Mr Beggs: Can the Member not accept that a reasonable conclusion is that, after completing citizenship training, young people are allowed to exercise the vote and, thereafter, may continue to vote? Is that not a reasonable, logical approach?

Mr Weir: If citizenship training took place at 12, would the Member allow someone aged 12 to vote?

Mr Beggs: I said, "After they have completed their citizenship training", which for most people finishes at 16.

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

Mr Weir: With respect, the point I made is that, if that citizenship training took place at 12, would the franchise be at the age of 12? That is the position that the Member is adopting from a logical point of view.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I gave way once already, and I have only a few minutes.

A number of points were raised, and the Member opposite talked about people driving at the age of 16. Of course, you cannot have a full licence at the age of 16. Maybe the Member was not necessarily aware of that. Spurious arguments have been used —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I will not.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Weir: With respect, I have a limited amount of time. I gave way once, and I will not give way a second time.

In some of the spurious arguments used, mention was made of the army. I suspect that the idea of a beret and a gun may be a lot more prevalent on the opposite side of the House in terms of knowledge of possession of those. Mention was made of the army, of marriage and of leaving home. All those are restricted for a 16-year-old by parental consent. There is not complete freedom. For example, in terms of serving on a jury and facing charges, the dividing line in an adult court is 18. The vast amount of key decisions are made at 18. The switch between secondary and tertiary education is also at 18.

This is not a decision that we have come to in just the United Kingdom. Internationally, voting at 16 is restricted to four countries and three other jurisdictions — Guernsey, the Isle of Man and Jersey. The indications are, for example, on the Isle of Man, in terms of the impact on the voting situation, that out of 1,800 people eligible to go on the electoral register at the age of 16 and 17 only 600 did. So, the idea that this will in some way massively increase the democratic buy-in is ill judged. Of the four countries that have voting at 16, one is Cuba, where you can effectively choose between communist and communist. That is not really a proper democratic choice.

Mr Eastwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I have already indicated that my time is short.

Compared with the four countries where that is allowed, 206 countries across the world, including every country in the European Union except Austria, have the voting age at 18. Indeed, there are more countries that have a minimum voting age above 18.

There are a wide range of democratic challenges for all of us: a sense of disenfranchisement from politics and a sense of disillusionment across the board. That is in not just Northern Ireland but across western Europe and the world as a whole.

Mr Hazzard quoted Abraham Lincoln. In the presidential election in America today, 150 years after the Gettysburg address, the age of voting will also be 18. There is international consensus. There is important work that all politicians have to do with engagement with the electorate, but we will not have that sense of re-engagement if we simply pander to gimmicks, which is what this motion does. This is a gimmick proposal. It is an attempt simply to be seen that we are very much in with the youth. This party may well, on this motion, stand alone, although there may be others who will vote with us. The reality is that the DUP is opposed to changes to that — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr Weir: There are, occasionally, differences of opinion on this issue but, frankly, rather than pandering today, we need to take the mature decision, along with virtually the rest of the entire world of 206 nations, which is to say that 18 is the right age for enfranchisement.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. My colleague Roy Beggs has outlined my party's support for the rationale behind the motion, and I echo that support.

Since I was elected, I have sought to engage with young people at every available opportunity. They are the future of Northern Ireland. It is fundamental that we listen to their views and do our best to bring them into the political process where possible. The Ulster Unionist Party has been working hard to get young people involved in politics. We held a very successful event at Stormont for our new young members a number of weeks ago. We also consulted heavily with young people in the run-up to the most recent Assembly election by writing to every school. We received hundreds of responses, with a significant number advocating a reduction in the voting age. I meet young people locally on an ongoing basis. As a member of the Education Committee, I understand the importance and relevance of that work. I am sure that many others in the House do also.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: Yes.

Mr Hussey: You will be aware of local democracy week and of the participation of many politicians from all parties. The view of most young people is that they are not represented by this House. Do you agree, and do you agree that reducing the age to 16 would certainly encourage the involvement of young people in politics?

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

Mrs Dobson: Thank you. I totally agree with that comment. I have taken part in the democracy events. They are an excellent way of engaging with young people. Thank you for that.

It is clear that we have a problem with getting people of all ages interested in politics on a broad scale. The turnout in some constituencies in the most recent Assembly election was an indication of that. In my constituency of Upper Bann, just over half the electorate — 55·3% — voted. Other constituencies had similar or worse turnouts, with 48·5% in Strangford and 45·9% in North Down being other poor examples. In 1998, the turnout in Upper Bann was over 70%. The decrease is evident, and that trend is largely mirrored across Northern Ireland over the intervening years. It is down to us to ensure that that decline in engagement with politics is reversed. One way in which that could be done is through a reduction in the voting age. If we empower young people to vote at the age of 16, it may become something that stays with them and encourages them to vote continually as they get older. I will move on to the issue of representation.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that it is unfortunate that the young people of Northern Ireland are largely represented by the two largest parties? The DUP has indicated that it is opposed to widening the franchise to young people, while Sinn Féin does not exercise its vote at Westminster, which will ultimately take the decision.

Mr Flanagan: Have you any votes in Westminster? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Beggs: We aspire.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mrs Dobson: I thank my colleague for the intervention. I agree with him: I find it ironic. Too often, when we ask —

Mr Hazzard: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, I have already given way twice.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No.

Too often, when we ask young people who represents them, the answer is "No one". That may be because of the disconnect that they feel from politicians and political institutions, owing to the fact that they have no say in who is elected to represent them in their area. I have no hesitation in saying that I am elected to represent all the people of Upper Bann, regardless of factors such as religious belief, political opinion or age. It is down to me to present myself as an elected representative for all my constituents. Voting for the motion sends out the right message to our young people.

In supporting the motion, I have, of course, considered Sinn Féin's agenda in tabling it. Its actions are clearly motivated by political gain. Northern Ireland's demographics are changing, and Sinn Féin believes that the votes of 16-year-olds could benefit it. However, I am confident in the values of my party and the merits of the Union. In any election or referendum, they can be explained to young people and older people alike. The bigger issue is that we do the right thing for young people across the country. Giving them the ability to vote should also put the onus on political parties to get involved more with young people. We must also look at the issue morally. As we heard earlier, young people are considered responsible enough for a number of activities, such as joining the army, working at 16 and driving at 17. Young people, therefore, should have a choice at election time.

I want to refer to unemployment statistics, which show that a record number of young people are unemployed. The labour force survey results from October show that one in five young people — 21.1% — is currently unemployed. With so many young people navigating their way through the difficulties of the current economic downturn, it is more important than ever that they have a say at a political level.

I reiterate my support for the motion. I have not heard a convincing argument why we should not trust 16- and 17-year-olds enough to vote. My party and I will continue to press for positive change, which will help young people. The motion is a step towards that type of change.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this rather lively debate. We brought the issue to the Assembly during the last term, and it is good to see that there is nearly cross-party support across the Chamber for a reduction in the voting age. Sixteen-year-olds can, conceivably, marry and make a decision to spend the rest of their life with one person; they can engage in sexual relations; and they can have children. However, according to the DUP and others, they cannot decide the best party to vote for and what can be put in a blue bin. There is an imbalance that needs to be addressed. Young people are mature, and parties across the Chamber recognise that, including the First Minister and the MPs for North Antrim and Lagan Valley. Sixteen- and 17-year-olds can demonstrate adequate maturity to vote. Some 16-year-olds whom I know are more mature than some of the 60-year-olds across the Chamber. That is a fact.

The Member for East Antrim referred to turnouts being down and our need to address the issue of less citizen participation in voting and the electoral process. That is true. Alastair Ross referred to the fact that, on the Isle of Man, fewer than half of those between the ages of 16 and 18 who are allowed to vote do not take the opportunity to do so. In recent years, the same has applied across the board in our local elections. We need to address youth disengagement and help young people to become involved in the democratic process at an early stage. The minimum voting age may be 18, but, because of the way in which elections are spaced out, some young people who leave school at the age of 16 having attended citizenship classes and been awarded qualifications may not get an opportunity to vote until they are 21, which is half a decade later. That is a huge gap. If the voting age were reduced to 16, a person might not get an opportunity to vote until they were 17 or 18, but we would ensure that more and more young people were involved in the democratic process.

Citizenship is taught in schools, and young people can join trade unions and be a director of a company but cannot vote on matters to do with the Assembly or local councils. I see that the opposer of the motion finally has some

support on the opposite Benches. The DUP is significantly split on the issue. As Mr Hussey said, in 2005, the First Minister signed an early day motion in which it stated that the time was right to lower the voting age to 16. I agree with the First Minister: the time is right to lower the voting age to 16.

6.00 pm

Mr Allister: I am opposed to this proposition, not just because I am a grumpy old man. *[Laughter.]* And not just because I am opposed to most things. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Swann: Is it because you are supporting the DUP?

Mr Allister: And not because I am supporting the DUP. *[Laughter.]* I am opposed to it because I think that it is a very trite and foolish proposition.

In any society, you have to draw lines and make decisions about what is the appropriate age of majority and the age for voting. I think that 18 represents an age of sufficient maturity to be the right age. In my logic, it follows that 16 represents an age of inadequate maturity to be afforded what equates to the age of majority and the right to vote.

At times, this debate — for the short time that I have been in the Chamber for it — sounded more like that of a school debating society, which, I think, is the last place that I heard the subject debated. The quality and nature of the debate is perhaps reflective of the fact that this is a subject that we are spending time on, yet, as an Assembly, can do absolutely nothing about. You invite, and therefore get, all the politics of gimmickry, of the fad and of appealing to what is seen to be a populist notion within a certain youthful constituency, in the safe and certain knowledge —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: In a moment.

In the safe and certain knowledge that, no matter how much you appeal to that particular issue and no matter how many brownie points you collect from that particular constituency, it is not going to happen, because the House cannot control it. However, you can gain those brownie points and look good to that constituency, and I suspect that that is the motivation of a lot of Members who have spoken in support of the motion. I will give way now.

Mr McCartney: Would the Member agree that there are many issues that have been spoken about and debated in the House that we have no power over? However, that should not limit us in our range of debate.

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

Mr Allister: The House excels itself, par excellence, in debating matters about which it has, thankfully, no control. Indeed, if we did not debate such issues, I do not think that there is any prospect of us being here until 6.00 pm on very many days. The truth of the matter is that there is a great paucity of the real nitty-gritty legislation that we can control and do something about. For the appearance of this place, some people probably need motions such as this so that they can pad out the time and pander to the constituency that a particular motion happens to appeal to.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that given that the Government have agreed to widen the franchise in Scotland, the first point of achieving that direction in Northern Ireland should be the Assembly giving a clear message to Westminster? Only at that point will the Westminster Government listen.

Mr Allister: As a unionist, I must say that I do not think that a nationalist referendum is a good precedent on which to build in respect of the voting age or anything else. It is quite clear that the granting of the reduction in the voting age to 16 on the referendum in Scotland was part of a political deal that was demanded by Mr Salmond and met by the Prime Minister as quid pro quo for something else. I think that it is a wrong precedent and a foolish measure and that Westminster may regret it, because it will build pressure towards granting the vote at 16 in the place that can decide those issues.

I do think, in all seriousness, that since this is, fundamentally, an issue of the maturity of those who are voting, it is a step too far. It is not that there are not some very mature 16- and 17-year-olds. Of course there are. Indeed, they could put some people who are a lot older to shame. However, across the board, you could not say that your average 16-year-old is imbued with the maturity that you would expect from someone exercising something as significant as the right to vote. I think that society is entitled to say that this is an adult exercise and that

electing our Government is very serious. Elections to somewhere like this place may not be so serious, but there is certainly something very serious about electing our Government in Westminster. In consequence, some degree of seriousness and maturity must be attached to doing that, and this proposition would undermine that. So, I oppose the motion.

Mr Agnew: I think that this is the right time and place to have this debate. As has been pointed out by others, the franchise to vote in the Scottish referendum on independence will be extended to 16- and 17-year-olds. The Irish Constitutional Convention is looking at the potential for lowering the voting age. The Welsh Assembly has called for votes at 16. Indeed, a private Member's Bill that looks at lowering the voting age to 16 had its First Reading in the House of Lords on 22 October. So, I disagree with Mr Allister when he says that we cannot do anything about it here. We can send a clear message across the Irish Sea and across the Irish border that the Northern Ireland Assembly believes in and wants votes at 16.

I agree with Mr Dickson's comment that there should be no taxation without representation. At 16, you receive your national insurance card and with it the right to work and the responsibility to pay taxes if you do. You are directly taxed by the state, yet you have no say on that state's policies. That needs to be addressed. When we allocate budgets from our block grant, we should remember that many 16- and 17-year-olds have contributed to that pot, and they should have a say in how it is spent. We need to see greater inclusion of young people's issues in election manifestos, and reducing the voting age will help us move in that direction.

I often hear it claimed that young people are apathetic, and Colum Eastwood made the strongest case that that is not so. Young people are matched only by those at the other end of the age spectrum in being the most passionate and holding the strongest opinions of any age group. It is probably in middle age, when you have a career, a family and so many other things to occupy your time, that you do not have time to consider the various issues that affect not just you but others. Young people have that time, and they care passionately about issues, as can be demonstrated by campaigns that they are involved in. Look at the number of student and young people's protests over the years. It is worth pointing out that our young people of today are probably the best informed that we have ever had. With unprecedented access to

information, our young people are better informed than they have ever been. We see that from the number of e-petitions and e-campaigns that they engage in. Young people already engage in participative democracy.

Mr Ross: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: I will give way.

Mr Ross: Given the point that the Member has just made, can he explain why it remains the case that those aged between 18 and 24 do not vote in election after election? We continually hear it argued that reducing the voting age to 16 will increase participation. Why is there not that level of participation among 18-year-olds if they are so well-informed at this moment?

Mr Agnew: I will come to that shortly, and I will address the Member's point. However, I believe that we should extend the opportunity to 16- and 17-year-olds — who are actively engaged in political campaigns — to vote for the political parties that they wish to represent their views.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Sure.

Mr Hussey: Do you agree with me — a not-so-grumpy middle-aged man and a bachelor to boot — that 16- to 18-year-olds generally feel that we do not represent them because, in their opinion, we do not listen to them?

Mr Agnew: Absolutely. I believe that when politicians engage in young people's issues and with young people in a way that is attractive to them, they will come out and vote. I hope to put that to the test. I hope and believe that, in North Down, because of the level of my engagement with young people, we will see an increase. Indeed, I have had a lot of feedback from church youth groups and the YMCA that young people are talking about politics in North Down in a way that they did not before, because I have addressed their issues. Indeed, I was banned from a supermarket, believe it or not, for standing up for young people who held a peaceful protest — a freeze mob. They stood still for two minutes and were lambasted for that dastardly behaviour. I stood up for them, defended them and was banned from a supermarket. The amount of support that I have had for standing up for young people doing that has been incredible.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: This is the last time.

Mr Allister: Does the logic of the Member's position on giving the franchise at 16 cause him to conclude that the age of eligibility to stand for Parliament must also be reduced to 16?

Mr Agnew: We can look at that.

Mr Allister: Is it a good thing?

Mr Agnew: The Assembly has an increasingly young membership. The average age is not young enough, but I welcome the fact that more and more young people are entering politics in Northern Ireland, and I hope that the trend continues.

I believe that, collectively, as politicians, we fail to engage young people in the political process. We have work to do on that front, and that point has been made. We have failed to get young people to register to vote and, indeed, out to vote. However, there is considerable evidence — I challenge Mr Ross on this point — that by reducing the voting age, we can increase the proportion and the number of young people voting. If you look at research by Mark Franklin, you will see that he believes that the stable context in which young people of 16 live makes it much easier to engage them in the franchise of voting. At 18, you are possibly heading off to university and moving house. In fact, you may move house every year. For that reason, you fall off the voting register, or are registered at the wrong address or at your parents' house, so you do not receive your voting card. However, the evidence suggests that through citizenship classes — the point was well made by Roy Beggs and others — age 16 is when young people think about engaging in politics. That is a good time to say that, now that you have been told why it is important to vote, we will give you the opportunity to vote.

There is other evidence. The kids voting programme conducted by Steven Chaffee — I hope that I pronounced his name correctly — at Stanford University found that increasing political discussion in education when young people are engaged increases voter turnout. So there is evidence that if we lower the voting age, we can increase the number of young people voting. The question is not whether 16- to 18-year-olds would be the biggest voting group or how they would compare with other age groups, but whether doing so would make it more likely that 16- to 18-year-olds, and, indeed, 18- to 25-year-olds, would vote. That must be the key question. If it would make

young people's engagement in the political process more likely, which I believe that it would, it has to be a good thing.

I come back to the point about the transient nature of student life. On turning 18, you may move out of the family home to go to university, to work or to start a family. The evidence of that can be seen in south Belfast, which has the lowest level of voter registration because, I think, of the transience of student life. Most people living there are aged 18 to 21. If we get them voting at 16, they are more likely to continue exercising that franchise when they go to university. The other benefit of getting young people registered to vote at the age of 16 or 17 is that most of them will be at school, particularly those aged 16. So when the Electoral Office runs campaigns to get young people to register to vote, school is the place to do it. If young people were enfranchised to vote at the age of 16, they would be more likely to register.

6.15 pm

It has been pointed out that there is an absolute incongruity in the positions of various DUP members on different issues. The DUP believes that, at age 10, a young person is perfectly able to make the decision to commit a crime and to be held fully responsible for it. In fact, the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice believes that a child of eight is capable of being held fully responsible for his or her actions. However, the DUP does not believe that at 16, six years later, a young person should have the right to vote. I find that incredible and completely incongruous.

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

Mr Agnew: It is an inconsistent position. We have heard that the First Minister has already supported voting at 16, as have Jeffrey Donaldson and, as has been pointed out, Ian Paisley Jnr.

I will finish with one final comment. *[Interruption.]* As Roy Beggs pointed out, what is learned in your younger years becomes a habit in later life. I think that that is a lesson that we should take on board today.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 51; Noes 29.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hussey, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McClarty, Ms McCorley, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Agnew and Ms Fearon

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly believes that the voting age should be reduced to 16 for all elections and referendums; and calls on the Westminster Government to introduce legislation to accommodate this change.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Planning Applications: Foyle

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic for the debate will have 15 minutes, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately seven minutes, if required.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to have this Adjournment debate on a very important issue in the Foyle constituency. There are nine major Derry planning applications in the system. One of them is for the H2 zone on the Bunrana Road, and it has been in the planning system for almost 10 years. Others have been in the system for many years.

Derry's retail strategy, as presented and announced in July 2010 — over two years ago — made five recommendations, including the need for strengthened planning focus, city centre expansion, marketing co-ordination and improved integration.

At that stage, the report looked at 38 planning applications since 2001. There was 7,811 square feet of vacant floor space in the Waterside area of the city and 36,682 square feet vacant in the city centre. I suggest that those figures have altered greatly, even since then.

6.30 pm

I highlight those figures because we have huge delays in decisions around out-of-town applications, and we have no statutory planning guidance to protect our current city centre, which is struggling daily. The Derry Area Plan was adopted in May 2000. Work had commenced on that in January 1993. The research was dated from 1993 to 1996, so the retail monitoring information that was used is nearly 20 years old. Therefore, we now have a very out-of-date plan, which is still used as a material consideration, and often primary consideration, for the city. Our city has delivered huge efforts in the development of the One City, One Plan, One Voice regeneration plan and has many opportunities facing into 2013 with the City of Culture and Fleadh Cheoil.

Key to all those initiatives is the legacy for our people. Derry, therefore, needs a supportive statutory framework to deliver on our regeneration plan, retail strategy, riverside master plan and Foyle valley gateway master plan.

We have examples of where statutory planning guidance was used in other places, and I will cite just one. These powers of statutory planning guidance were brought into effect in the planning for Victoria Square. Therefore, if it can happen in Belfast, why not Derry?

The Roger Tym report said that there was a:

"Lack of a strong and effective City Centre policy presumption and supporting information to inform decision making".

As I said, our legacy will be our jobs, and we have committed to 12,900 jobs over the next 10 years. Therefore, we need to ensure that planning processes will support this economic regeneration, not the current processes, which are hindering it. We also need interim measures, such as the supplementary planning guidance, to be implemented immediately.

Progress on the retail strategy has failed to tackle the key policy framework that is required, and I will cite just three examples of this failure. Review of the city centre boundary as it currently is was stressed as urgent. This is now, after two years, only ongoing. A city centre design guide, which was to be city centre-wide, is only considering conservation areas. The Queen's Quay area was identified as a key entry point into the city, and, while there have been a number of environmental improvements, which are very welcome, this has little to do with the redevelopment and investment that that area requires. That area requires a planning framework for this to be progressed.

Two years since the retail strategy, we have another retail report from the Environment Minister. We are told by the Minister that there are competing voices and demands, and we have met most if not all of those sectors and developers. Of course there are competing interests. That is the nature of development. Out-of-town shopping will support wider geographical areas of need, but we must also reflect that particular types of retail can impinge on our current city centre. The point is that planning policy should be interventionist in the market, and not prohibitive. We are told through the report:

"a comprehensive approach to retailing will allow the Department to make robust and balanced decisions".

Minister, Derry already knows this and has had the analysis completed since July 2010. When, then, will the robust and balanced decisions be made?

Derry has 37,655 square metres of convenience floor space and 84,750 square metres of comparison/non-food/high street. Again, we knew this in 2010. The comparison sector is the type of goods that our current city centre can attract, but the local planning office has consistently refused to accept that, without planning policy, this will remain a report on a desk. Interestingly, the Minister's report in August highlighted that 54% of respondents in a survey do their top-up shopping in local shops and petrol stations, which is a strong indication of the need for protection and a supportive framework for our local businesses. Some 23% of shoppers surveyed in Strabane were from Derry, and all shopped in Asda. Some 44% of respondents from Donegal visit the city regularly to undertake their main food shop. Derry is recognised as the primary location for comparison retailing in the north-west, with 88% of all respondents stating that that form of shopping is carried out in the city.

The report goes on to state:

"The level of retail vacancy in and around the Strand Road is of great concern to the department and a situation that will continue to be monitored."

I ask what progress has been made on that observation. Vacancy is lower than the North of Ireland average of 18.5%; Derry's retail vacancy is at 15.25%.

I spoke just a number of hours ago to a local developer, who highlighted that he had organisations ready to come in and take office space, in business and in leisure, with a potential focus on the town centre. In his view, current planning policies are not encouraging investor confidence. That particular developer indicated that because of the lack of planning, he cannot provide a building solution to interested individuals, and if planning policies and decisions were in place, he could — on that application alone — provide up to 1,200 jobs by Christmas.

When, therefore, will we get the statutory framework that ensures a balanced approach to out-of-town employment opportunities but also protects our city centre? The major

opportunities that our city faces over the next few years require a supportive, current and robust planning framework. We must support economic regeneration, and the Minister of the Environment has the power to make that happen. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hussey: I begin by congratulating Ms McLaughlin for bringing this matter to the Assembly's attention. My colleagues in Foyle also have concerns about developments in Londonderry city and the wider Foyle constituency. Those concerns are shared by my colleagues in East Londonderry and in my constituency of West Tyrone.

We have come from that area that is west of the Bann, and we do not want to be seen as country cousins who are left to their own devices. The motion refers specifically to the Foyle constituency, and it is to that specific area that I will address the rest of my comments.

I have the honour of representing my party for Foyle, and at every opportunity that I can, I visit the constituency. I do so at least once a month.

The city of Londonderry will be the City of Culture of the United Kingdom in 2013, and it is clear that the eyes of the kingdom and beyond will turn towards Londonderry. The massive steps forward that have been taken in that city, such as the rejuvenation of Ebrington, are indicators of what can be achieved when there is a will to work together.

We support the measures being taken in the run-up to the UK City of Culture year. That is why the Minister is to be commended for initiatives such as his recent earmarking of £500,000 to address derelict buildings and such problems in and around the city centre. That is why it is crucial that he get the planning backlog cleared to allow his Department to take a much more strategic approach to the city and enable the planners and local stakeholders to start looking forward.

There has been a clear absence of strategic planning, and that undoubtedly has led to the current economic difficulties that the region is facing. There is no doubt that the north-west, and the Foyle constituency specifically, has suffered from decades of sustained underinvestment. It is also a fact that the city was at times under siege during the Troubles. I feel that it is right at this stage to condemn those who continue to attack Londonderry in the guise of dissident republicanism. The city has moved with the times, and it is time that those individuals walked away and supported the dream that we all have for Londonderry,

which is for it to be a vibrant 21st-century city, with its rich 17th-century history intermingling with the present.

In February 2012, Alex Attwood stated that it was his intention to deal with a range of major planning applications. In Londonderry alone, there are nine major retail applications. We welcome the progress that has begun; for example, the redevelopment of Lisnagelvin to allow for extended modern retail facilities. However, it is equally important that the Minister does not lose sight of existing businesses and the need to ensure that all are playing on a level field. Clearly, there is huge untapped potential in some of those major planning applications.

Earlier this year, Nelson McCausland announced that the Ilex Urban Regeneration Company had lodged an outline planning application for the redevelopment of the 14-acre Fort George site. It is anticipated that it will be a mixed-use development, with residential, industrial, educational, office, leisure, retail and restaurant facilities. Given that the Executive have been in possession of Fort George since 2004, it is important that that planning application be processed without delay.

Councils will shortly be granted significant new planning powers, and the Assembly has an obligation to make sure that the transfer of such significant responsibilities is done properly and is accompanied with the requisite resources. We want planning to be generally user-friendly; whether in Londonderry or Omagh, we want to see all of Northern Ireland flourish. I am sure that we have all read the reports that the United Kingdom is expected to move out of recession, albeit slowly, ahead of the other European states. We need to see that we are prepared for growth. I want to see the west grow, and any cutting of red tape will support growth by cutting out unnecessary delays.

Mr Eastwood: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I welcome the chance to speak about the opportunities that Derry has. Unfortunately, there are not many people here to hear it.

Mr Hussey: What you have in here is good.

Mr Eastwood: I am glad that you are here, Ross.

Ms McLaughlin talked about the One Plan, the future of Derry in 2013 and all the tremendous opportunities that we have. I think that that is true: we have tremendous opportunities. It is incumbent on all Ministers to ensure that we

maximise those opportunities. With regard to the Programme for Government, it is unfortunate that the One Plan was merely mentioned. It said that we wanted to develop the One Plan, but no reference was made to developing the major part of the One Plan — the one real game-changer in the One Plan — the Magee campus and the development of 10,000 student places. At the last election, Ms McLaughlin's party promised that that would be secured. Unfortunately, it has not been secured. I encourage every Member to ensure that every element that was promised in the One Plan is delivered, not just developed.

I understand Ms McLaughlin's frustration. I have probably sat in more meetings on these issues than most people, and I have probably taken more phone calls at all hours of the day and night about these issues. I have been lobbied by developers, residents and city-centre traders on all sides of the argument. The fact is that there is no simple answer to each and every one of the proposed developments. What is true, though, is that there is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shape the retail future of our city. I would not want any Minister to take those decisions lightly.

When Minister Attwood came into power on 5 May 2011, there were 60 live article-31 applications, 28 of which have been dealt with already. That is a far better record than any previous Environment Minister who has operated in these fields. I want to make sure that we get it right. I want to make sure that the commitment to the survival of not only the city-centre businesses but all the convenience stores that Ms McLaughlin talked about is paramount and at the centre of every decision that we make. Knowing the Minister, and sitting in on many of his meetings, I know that that is at the forefront of his mind. It has to be said that the Minister has committed enormous effort towards the development of the city that we are all so proud of. He has committed £1.2 million for heritage buildings, and, just last week, he committed £500,000 to fix some of the issues that we have around dereliction in the run-up to the City of Culture year. All of us want to see that happening, and I believe that every Minister should do their job in that regard. Even the Minister of the Environment, whom you would not expect to have any real role in the City of Culture, has put his money where his mouth is. He has also made sure that the hotel applications have been fast-tracked, and we now have approvals for hotels. Whether they are built in time is up to the developer. We have also seen Department of the Environment (DOE) jobs being decentralised to Derry. I think that that is another good development.

6.45 pm

The fact is that we have seen a real effort by the Department and the Minister to ensure that we get these decisions out the door. However, I, for one, do not want to see these decisions go out the door in the wrong way, and I do not want us to have to go through years and years of judicial review and court appearances. I want to make sure that public money is used wisely and correctly and that we get the retail solution that every person in Derry city needs to get right, because there are no other instances in any other city in the North in which eight or nine major applications can have an impact on each of the others. It is very important that we allow the Minister to make the decisions and to get them right. I have full confidence that he will do that, and I have full confidence that that will happen very quickly.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I congratulate my party colleague Maeve McLaughlin on securing this Adjournment debate on a very important strategic issue for Derry. I welcome the fact that the Minister is here. I agree with Mr Eastwood; we all know that the Minister has spent a lot of time dealing with this issue. I can see why you have selected Mr Eastwood as your Assembly private secretary; he certainly gave you a glowing reference for any future job that you may wish to undertake.

I preface my remarks by acknowledging the recent announcement of half a million pounds in relation to the City of Culture and the £1.2 million for heritage works. They are very welcome. They are recognition of the importance of the City of Culture and the importance that the Executive and the Minister have placed on it. I also acknowledge the presence of Ross Hussey. You have done a good service to the Ulster Unionists by participating in today's debate.

Maeve McLaughlin has outlined the situation. It is, obviously, something that the Minister has inherited. If there is an overall critique, it is that, over the years, there has been an inability to make decisions around crucial planning applications in the city. I know that the Minister is committed to the thrust of the debate. He has made a number of public statements, and I have listened to him on Radio Foyle and here in the House. We are all pressing for the earliest possible decision. Perhaps the Minister will take the opportunity today to present a timeline for that. He is smiling; I hope that that is a recognition of something.

I agree with what Maeve McLaughlin has said, and I know Colum Eastwood has said it: it is not that we want a decision made in haste that is not the best or proper decision. Underlying the frustration of many people over many years has been the fact that when it comes to crucial points in the decision-making process, too often there has been a bit of a retreat into analysing the last study or the last set of proposals. Now is the opportunity for us to give the Minister the time and space. I think we have afforded him the time and space for the decisions to be made. We must not allow previous decisions or the previous inability to make decisions to stand in his road as we take this forward. As I said, I hope the Minister will give some sort of timeline today. I am sure we will all want to know what the decisions are going to be, but a timeline would certainly be very much appreciated.

I have certainly listened very intently to the Minister when he is speaking on the issue. I know that, in the past, he has made criticisms, if that is the right word, that there are, perhaps, too many voices coming out of the city and that sometimes there can be conflicting views. Again, Colum Eastwood has outlined that. I am not saying that I have had as many meetings as Colum has, but we have all been lobbied and given presentations by the various applicants. It is understandable that there are competing views. If there are those competing views, it may come across as though they are in total opposition. However, I think that they are all united by the fact that they want the right and proper decision made for the city.

It was interesting that Ross Hussey, in his contribution, mentioned underinvestment. We see, in a sense, underachievement, because of that lack of investment. This is an opportunity. I know that there are nine applications pending. Most of us have been given presentations by each of the applicants. You see the strengths; you see the weaknesses; you see the complexities. We do understand that there are big decisions for you to make. I will make a broad appeal: we would like to see, at the heart of this, you do what is in the best interests of the people of Derry city; we would like to see, at the heart of this, job creation; we would like to ensure that we maximise the opportunity for the creation of jobs in the city. Some of the applicants have made public statements and presentations to you, Minister. Some of them are dependent on their applications being successful so that that will create the space for them to grow their own businesses elsewhere and open up other job creation possibilities. We hope that that all feeds into whatever decisions you have to make.

Colum Eastwood mentioned the One Plan. A big part of that was to say that retail does have a crucial role to play in job creation opportunities in the future. I agree with him that the One Plan was, over a number of years, about the city coming together. It was maybe two or three years in the processing and final decision-making processes. Whatever criticism may have been made in the past that sometimes Derry did not speak with a single voice, which is understandable given the complexity of issues, the One Plan was our best guess of what we felt was in the best interests of the city. Retail is at the heart of that. As we take this forward, we are mindful of some of the broader strategic considerations, which Maeve McLaughlin outlined. We hope that, in the future, when you make your decision, you will be guided by what is best for Derry. You are obviously tied to planning policy and other legal requirements, but at the core must be what is best for Derry.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Before commenting, I acknowledge that, as the night closes in, two families — and many others, indeed — face a very long night: the Black family, for whom there was a very strong turnout from this Chamber this afternoon; and the family of Katherine Kelley, who tragically died following a very serious road accident over the weekend. Our thoughts and wishes go to those families, and to the other young people who remain in hospital following the accident in Portadown.

I welcome the debate. I am one of those Ministers who thinks that the more I am held to account, be it on the Floor in the Assembly, publicly or otherwise, the better it is for me. It is better for DOE, it is better for planning, and it is certainly better for democracy.

I will deal as best I can, in the time allowed, with the issues raised. Let me first make this point. Maeve McLaughlin said that current processes hinder planning development in Derry/Londonderry. I understand why she makes that point. However, in many, many instances, the evidence does not back up that point. Look at the decisions made for the city of Derry over the past 18 months or thereabouts. You will see four or five hotel decisions. That is not hindering planning and development in Derry; that is enabling development in Derry. You will see a whole catalogue of restoration planning approvals, making and shaping the city in advance of the year of culture. Extra money came from the Department for Social Development, arising from the comprehensive spending review bid when I was Minister, to ensure that the city looks its best for 2013.

Planning approvals for sites such as the Vital Venue and the lighting strategy all require planning approval. That has all been processed in double quick time by DOE over the past 18 months. In my view, that tells part of the tale of planning in Derry. Part of that tale is not that processes hinder planning development, but, in many instances, as the 2013 projects, the hotel decisions and the venue decisions demonstrate, there is a good narrative around planning in Derry. The best example of that is the Peace Bridge. Due to the constraints of EU funding timelines, a decision was made very quickly and very well by the planning authorities, to the point that the Peace Bridge has won national awards and has been entered in international competitions, not just in respect of the design but in respect of the planning. That is part of the story about Derry.

Secondly, I agree with one of the essential points made by Ms McLaughlin, which is that places develop best when there is plan-led development. That was the essential core of her argument. When you have statutory planning guidance and statutory plans, you have plan-led development. That is a better model of planning going forward. Some 80% of the land mass of the Republic of Ireland has plans. There have been problems with the plans, confirmed by the tribunals in respect of zoning issues and corruption. Nonetheless, 80% of the land mass has plans. In 2000, they recognised in their planning legislation and have rolled out, especially since 2005, that plan-led development is the best model going forward. You will have no argument with me about that. If you look at the Clare county plan, you will see that one of its big themes is, "Come and invest your renewables money on the coast of Clare because it has the best quality wind, wave and tide in the world", confirming that, in my view, renewables are Ireland's biggest economic opportunity. That demonstrates what plan-led development can mean for Clare and for all parts of the North of Ireland.

We do not have a full suite of plans, and we need to update that, but we were unable to update it because developers in the North, unhappy with planning decisions, went all the way to the European Court to try to derail particular planning applications in the North. Fortunately, that matter was settled earlier this year, and in the run down to the transfer of planning functions to local councils in 2015, we should work and accelerate how we are going to move forward plans, including for the city of Derry.

Ross Hussey was right. We have to get the devolution of the planning functions right,

because the responsibility that will fall to local councils for the vast majority of planning decisions, for community planning and for local development plans is enormous. You only have to look at Scotland to see how some councils get it right and some councils get it wrong, how some councils continue to be a collection of planning lobbyists — legitimate though that is — and other councils live up to the threshold of being the planning authority driving forward plan-led development.

That is only one aspect of what I am trying to do in the Department, namely to have the most radical reshaping of planning in a generation. That is what the planning Bill that I hope to bring to the Chamber before Christmas will do. That is why we have a new senior management team. That is why, when we went out for consultation last week on permitted development rights for farm dwellings, we proposed 500 square metres, which is more than in any other part of these islands, to enable farming to prosper, not least because of the opportunities for agrifood going forward. That is why I want to have a single planning policy, rather than having a full suite of 10 or 20 planning policies, collapsing down the purpose of planning going forward, with an overview from the Executive saying that the purpose of planning is to drive economic development in a sustainable way. That is why we need a policy that accommodates the huge onshore and offshore opportunities for renewables.

7.00 pm

My colleague Mr Eastwood said that close to 50% of the number of article 31 planning applications that I inherited 18 months ago have now, one way or the other, been resolved. Now, the number in the system is only a few over 30. Of those, seven refer to Derry, and two non-article-31 retail planning applications also refer to Derry. What is the advice that I got from Derry? I do not expect — not least because of the development community that exists up there — that they will all agree that this family of retail applications should or should not be approved. Some of the advice from Derry is to approve everything; some is to approve nothing; and some is to approve some applications. It is very difficult to interpret what is coming back from Derry. I must say this to Ms McLaughlin: it is particularly difficult that one reason why, arguably, there has not been plan-led development in Derry is because everybody — or, at least, some people — said, "Suspend it until we come up with this comprehensive One Plan". In my view, there is evidence of mission creep by Ilex, but that is for

another day. I have not hidden my view on that — I have not hidden that from the board of Ilex.

Putting that aside, where are we with these planning applications? First, I will take a precautionary approach. I believe that the argument put forward by town centre retailers generally, including those in Derry city centre, means that a precautionary approach is appropriate. Secondly, as Mr McCartney said, I need to be very careful that I apply current law and planning policy in making those decisions, mindful that my ambition is to have a new planning policy statement 5 that reconfigures retail planning to favour in-town over out-of-town retail. Thirdly, as Mr Eastwood said, I have to get this right. Why? It will shape retail in Derry for a generation, and, if I do not get it right, one or more, and probably many more than one, retail developer will have me in court. Fourthly, when we have gathered all the evidence, had all those meetings and completed the retail study, which was necessary because, as Mr McCartney said, it revealed the slippage of business to Strabane and the opportunities for people from the north-west and Donegal to shop in Derry, the character of the first phase of those planning decisions will be known before the end of the month.

Adjourned at 7.03 pm.



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