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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 November 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Why is it that, last week the Executive once more made an announcement, which was billed as a key economic announcement, not to the House but to the media? Is there nothing further that you can do to curb the obvious contempt that the Executive have for the House?

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for his point of order. I assure him that I continually raise this issue with the Executive. Just last week, I put in a letter to the First Minister and deputy First Minister as well on this issue. As I continually say to the whole House, this really is an issue for Ministers and for the Executive. I always encourage Ministers to come to the House with statements that are of importance, but, at the end of the day, it is really up to them to decide which statements are important and which are not. I have some sympathy with the Member's point of order, but these issues lie solely with the Executive and individual Ministers. Let us move on.

Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I have been given notice by members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend today's sitting up to 8.00 pm. Under Standing Order 10(3A), the Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 12 November 2012 be extended to no later than 8.00pm. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

Ministerial Statement

Public Expenditure Adjustments: 2012-13 October Monitoring and 2013-14 and 2014-15 Budget Realignment

Mr Speaker: The Minister of Finance and Personnel wishes to make a statement to the House.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I do, indeed, Mr Speaker. I am always happy to make statements to the House and to have them queried by Members. I do not have any intention of ever running away from the scrutiny of Members when it comes to making important announcements. I look forward to the scrutiny of the many Members who are in the House. I hope that the 'Belfast Telegraph' takes a photograph at some stage but not of the Sinn Féin Members.

My statement will cover three important issues. First, I intend to update the Assembly on the allocation that was made as part of the invest-to-save scheme that the Executive agreed in September. Secondly, I will inform Members of the 2012-13 October monitoring round outcome. Finally, I will outline the Executive's decisions on the 2013-14 and 2014-15 Budget realignment exercise.

Members will recall that, as part of June monitoring, the Executive agreed to allocate £30 million of resource funding to an invest-to-save scheme. The Executive subsequently agreed in September a number of allocations from the invest-to-save fund, totalling £23.6 million. The invest-to-save bids and agreed allocations are included in the tables that accompany the statement.

The most significant invest-to-save allocation was for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to take forward the Transforming Your Care (TYC) reform programme. That will not only transform the way in which health services are delivered to

the benefit of our citizens but will realise significant savings. The recurrent savings from 2014-15 onwards are estimated at nearly £26 million a year, which represents a very good return on the investment.

There was some £6.4 million of resource funding left unallocated, owing to the fact that the remaining bids did not meet the scheme's strict requirements. That funding was then made available for reallocation in the October monitoring round.

The October monitoring round is critical, since it allows the Executive to take an initial view on the resources that may be carried forward into the next financial year under the end-year flexibility arrangements agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury. It is also early enough in the financial year to reallocate a significant amount of resources and for Departments to be able to incur that expenditure. Indeed, the Executive again found themselves in the position of having a large amount of resources available for allocation. I will say more about that later.

The presentation of the October monitoring position again focuses on the non-ring-fenced resource and capital investment figures, since that is the funding that the Executive can use to deliver public services. However, the ring-fenced position, which relates to non-cash costs such as depreciation, is also included as a table separate from the statement. The Executive also continue to monitor departmental administrative cost expenditure, and the latest position is attached for Members' information.

Let me start by setting out the amount of resources that the Executive had available to allocate in this round. The Executive carried forward an overcommitment of £6.5 million resource expenditure and £12.7 million capital investment from the June monitoring round. As I mentioned, £6.4 million of resource funding was also made available from the invest-to-save initiative.

The Executive held £13 million of resource expenditure for the social investment fund and the childcare strategy. It is unlikely that more than £2 million of that funding will be spent in this financial year, so £11 million of resource funding was made available for allocation in this round. There was also £10 million of capital funding that was made available and has been held at the centre for the social investment fund.

In addition, funding was made available through savings in the EU Budget and reinvestment and

reform initiative (RRI) interest, and those savings amounted to £4 million. There was also a pressure totalling £3.5 million impacting on the centre position resulting from a failure to progress the review of education maintenance allowance (EMA) and to fund salary pressures for the Assembly Ombudsman, the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), the Lands Tribunal and judicial salaries. I am particularly disappointed that the EMA review has failed to progress. I probably do not need to name the Minister concerned, but, for clarification and so that the Assembly is in no doubt, the Education Minister has not progressed that review, despite the fact that it was endorsed by the Executive.

Taking all those issues into account resulted in a starting position of £11.3 million resource funding available and a small pressure on the capital side of £2.1 million. The Departments declared reduced requirements in this monitoring round of £24.2 million resource and £12.9 million capital investment. That, again, was a relatively high level of resource surrenders. The full details are included in the tables attached to the statement.

The public expenditure control framework provides each Department with considerable scope to address emerging pressures in their existing allocations on a unilateral basis. However, any proposals to move resources across spending areas in excess of the de minimis threshold of £1 million are subject to Executive approval. Departments may also reclassify between ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced resource expenditure. Those movements are also shown in the tables. There may also be departmental allocations that, for technical reasons, were incorrectly classified. Departments may also seek to reclassify some of their budget as part of a proactive management action. All such reclassifications require the Executive's approval. All the proactive movements and reclassifications that were agreed by the Executive have been included in the tables that accompany this statement.

All the issues highlighted so far, including the starting position, the departmental reduced requirements, the internal reallocations and the reclassifications, impacted on the resources available to the Executive in this monitoring round. The net impact of all those issues was that there was £43.6 million of resource funding and £7.5 million of capital investment available to the Executive. The Executive took the view that it would be prudent to carry forward an overcommitment into the January monitoring round in anticipation of further reduced requirements at that stage. That was

particularly important in this financial year since it has transpired that there have been significant delays in the delivery of the A5 and A8 road schemes. The delay is, of course, most acute in relation to the A5 since the work on the A8 has now commenced. The delay incurred so far has resulted in an easement in the Department for Regional Development of £31 million in this financial year. The Executive agreed that that would be managed in the DRD by allowing the Department to reallocate internally to other areas on the condition that the funding will be returned to the A5 and A8 road schemes in 2013-14 and 2014-15 as required. The funding will now be used to accelerate road structural maintenance and Northern Ireland Water capital projects.

The delay on the A5 has been caused by legal action being taken against the DRD. The issue remains unresolved. For each month that passes, DRD will have an easement of £10 million, which means that up to an additional £50 million could be returned to the centre in this financial year. As a contingency, Ministers agreed to consider whether further capital expenditure may be incurred in this financial year to make use of those resources if they become available. In addition, I have been in discussion with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on seeking some additional budget flexibility to manage that large capital project.

The Departments submitted bids worth £63.6 million resource and £50.9 million capital expenditure. Those bids are also detailed in the tables accompanying the statement.

12.15 pm

In addition to the departmental bids, Members will be aware of the jobs and economy initiative announced by the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week. Funding of £10 million, split equally between resource and capital, has been set aside for the 2012-13 financial year to take forward the jobs and economy initiative bids. The Executive agreed allocations totalling £33.2 million resource expenditure and £32.8 million capital investment. Since much more resource funding was available than capital, the Executive agreed to switch £20 million from resource to capital to facilitate those allocations. The allocations made are shown in the tables attached to the printed version of this statement, and I will highlight only a few of the main ones.

The Department for Regional Development received a total of £25.9 million, with most of that funding going towards the additional

maintenance of our roads and street lighting infrastructure.

The Executive decided to allocate a total of £14.3 million to the Department of Health. Most of that funding will contribute to reducing waiting times in our health sector. That will directly benefit people currently on hospital waiting lists, which remain a high priority for the Executive. A total of £8.3 million was allocated to the Department of Education towards the maintenance of the education estate and, specifically, to address the consequences of extensive fire damage to Arvalee School.

The Executive also agreed to allocate an additional £8 million towards the housing co-ownership scheme. That will not only help to fund an additional 180 new property owners but will boost housing demand at a time when the local housing market is struggling to recover.

The Executive allocated a significant amount of resources in this monitoring round. The allocations provide a significant boost to our construction sector and local housing market. This will help to stimulate the local economy at a very difficult time. Indeed, not only did the Executive specifically set aside £10 million towards the jobs and economy initiative but some £41.5 million of the October monitoring round allocations contributed directly to that initiative. The decisions taken mean that the Executive exits this monitoring round with an overcommitment in resource expenditure of £14.6 million and £10.3 million in capital investment. I believe that this is a reasonable position at this stage of the financial year. Of course, I will continue to monitor the position in respect of the A5 road scheme, since that represents a significant financial risk in this financial year.

I now turn to the realignment of the 2013-14 and 2014-15 Budget position. Before I go into the details of the realignment of budgets for the remaining years of the Executive's Budget 2011-15, I would like to make a brief comment on the review of financial processes. Over recent days, I have given many interviews, and a constant theme has been the difficulty in understanding the financial consequences of public expenditure decisions taken by the Executive. My review of financial processes was designed to address that lack of transparency. I promised the Assembly that it would be a priority for the Department. A paper has been with the Executive for the past number of months, but I have not been able to progress it. I find that deeply concerning, and I am sure that many Members will share that concern. Of course, one of the constant

themes during the Budget debate was what many of the figures meant. The whole point of the financial processes paper was to give that greater transparency. As I said, I do not mind scrutiny of the Budget or awkward questions on it, but, if the figures are hidden or wrapped up in a way that does not easily lead to that kind of questioning, the Assembly ought to be concerned. I am concerned that, because of the inability to get it through the Executive — that is due mainly to Sinn Féin — we still do not have the transparency that the Assembly would have wished.

Ms Ruane: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Wilson: Not during a statement. The Member should learn the rules of the Assembly. There is no option to make interventions during a statement. I am sure that she will have plenty of opportunity when the time comes, and I look forward to the question that she will put to me on this issue.

I turn to the detail of the Budget realignment. Members will no doubt be aware that many things impact on Budgets throughout the four-year period. I felt that it was prudent to present an opportunity to Executive colleagues to address some of the emerging issues that have arisen in respect of the 2013-14 and 2014-15 financial years. One of the key drivers for the Budget realignment was the departmental spending performances of 2011-12. My officials carried out an analysis of departmental underspend and examined the capital spending profiles of the forward two years. They concluded that there was scope for some Departments to surrender funding in the period 2013-15.

It is important for Members to recognise that, overall, the spending performance in 2011-12 was good. Although greater than expected, the reduced requirements surrendered by Departments were successfully utilised, meaning that year-end underspends fell within the scope of the Budget exchange scheme and no resources were lost to Northern Ireland. Details of the level of reductions are provided in the tables that accompany the statement.

I turn now to the allocations made in respect of the forward years. The Executive have taken this opportunity to confirm the transfer of £15 million and £75 million to the Department of Education in respect of the commitments made in January 2012 to increase funding to that Department. That directly relates to the budgets for individual schools, where the reductions were to have been 5% this year, 1%

next year and 5% the year after that. That was causing great difficulty for individual schools, and we have funded to reduce the impact on schools significantly, and that was welcomed earlier by the schools.

Members will be aware of the upcoming UK City of Culture celebrations in 2013 in Londonderry. To help fund these important cultural and tourism events, the Executive agreed to allocate £6.1 million to the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in 2013-14.

It has been agreed with Her Majesty's Treasury that aspects of air passenger duty (APD) will be devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive. That will enable us to take better account of local economic conditions and compete fairly with the lower rates of aviation duty that apply in the Republic of Ireland. However, in the devolution of the tax powers, due regard must be given to EU law. Under EU rules, the Executive will now have to be financially responsible for the revenues and administration costs of APD in Northern Ireland. To achieve this, there has been an annual adjustment to the block grant, and mechanisms will be put in place for the payment of the development and administration costs, which are likely to be around £5 million per annum. I have set aside funding for that purpose.

With the introduction of welfare reform, there remains the possibility that Her Majesty's Treasury will cut our housing benefit rates rebate by 10%. To ensure that there is enough time to assess the potential impact and provide an alternative scheme, I have set aside £13 million and £15 million in each of the two remaining budget years to address the potential shortfall in the existing rates support scheme.

In March, the Executive endorsed the Minister for Employment and Learning's proposals to introduce an assistance package to alleviate some of the worst effects of growing youth unemployment. His Department was allocated £5.8 million in June, and I am now allocating the forward years' funding identified at the time: £15.6 million in 2013-14 and £19.6 million in 2014-15. These amounts are in addition to and, therefore, complement the important £200 million economy and jobs initiative package.

In March 2012, the Executive agreed that departmental baselines should be adjusted to reflect the allocation of capital receipts identified by the asset management unit. A significant proportion of those receipts were to have been realised by DRD and related primarily to the sale of four revenue-generating assets. The

sale of those assets will lead to a loss of resource funding to DRD of some £1.5 million per annum. The Executive considered that that funding pressure should be addressed and therefore agreed to allocate £1.5 million resource DEL to DRD in 2014-15.

Finally, let me turn to the future years allocations in relation to the economy and jobs initiative. Members will be aware that that package included some of the October monitoring allocations, co-ownership funding and acceleration of projects that will provide a much-needed short-term boost to our construction sector. In addition, the Executive set aside £70 million over the next two years to fund the economy and jobs initiative. When all those things are factored in, there is approximately £200 million being targeted on specific measures designed to boost our economy. Should the funding of those projects exceed the initial envelope, we will look at ways to allocate additional money to those important initiatives.

I assure the House that the changes to budgets agreed by the Executive are designed to boost our economy and provide the necessary skills to educate and equip our workforce, strengthen our businesses and support investment. Announcements today will also provide significant investment in our health and education sectors. The additional funding allocations under the invest-to-save scheme and the October monitoring allocations will help drive essential health sector reform and reduce hospital waiting times. That is good news for everyone in Northern Ireland and shows that the Executive are seeking to deliver key long-term strategic reforms, even in difficult economic times. Our schools will also benefit greatly, both from the allocations in this financial year and those agreed for the next two years. That secures adequate funding for our schools sector to ensure that we continue to drive excellence in the education system. Finally, the allocations in the October monitoring round, along with the jobs and economy initiative, will provide an additional short-term boost to our economy and our construction sector. I therefore commend the statement to the House.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, as well as the work that the Executive have been doing to address our economic difficulties, in particular, the assistance that they are providing to the construction sector, as the Minister outlined, through allocations for roads and education

maintenance. Something that outlines the urgency of that is the situation at Patton. Indeed, a number of subcontractors have come to the Assembly today to speak to MLAs.

Minister, you referred to reduced requirements of £24.2 million in resource and £12.9 million in capital, and you described that as being relatively high. Do you believe that all Departments have declared their reduced requirements at this stage, and how confident are you that a larger level of reduced requirements will not present itself in the January monitoring round?

Mr Wilson: The Chairman makes an important point about reduced requirements. We have stressed to all Departments that, if there is likely to be an underspend, they should not leave it until the last moment to declare it. We do not have the flexibility that we had in previous years, albeit that we have negotiated some flexibility. We do not have the open-ended flexibility that we had in previous years to carry money forward. All I can say is that I am satisfied with the way that Departments have behaved to date. Some declared quite significant reduced requirements in June, so they were looking ahead. Obviously, the reduced requirements that were declared in October were fairly high for this time of year. There is constant contact between my Department's officials and officials in other Departments to look ahead to see what spending is likely to be. I believe that Ministers have realised the importance of declaring reduced requirements at an early stage so that they can at least be used to fit in with the Programme for Government. That is the important thing, and I know that the Committee has emphasised it. The earlier we get them, the more we can slot them into aspects of the Programme for Government, rather than having a last-minute scramble to simply spend resources in the last two months of the year.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for the statement. There is some good news on the reallocation of some of the money. What has happened to the Minister's review of the financial process? That is an issue of concern for the Finance Committee and many other key stakeholders.

We want to hear about greater transparency in debates such as this. Certain people have been asking why this did not happen sooner.

12.30 pm

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

Mr Girvan: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Mr Wilson: Of course, it has not happened at all, other than in the form of the paper that the Department presented to the Executive but which has not yet been agreed by the Executive.

Let me spell it out. There is nothing that is demanding of Ministers in this. The review of financial processes would simply require Departments to outline their spending in more detail. There would be more budget lines so that Members could scrutinise them and determine what the money is being spent on — or what the Minister said the money is being spent on — and confirm what it is being spent on.

If there are more lines in the budget, it will mean that when a Minister decides to move money from one line to another, he or she will have to show that there is transparency so that Members know that what they voted for is being done. That is all that it is about.

I am not giving the Assembly any new news today, but the difficulty has been with the Minister of Education, who, ironically, will give that information to the Treasury in London before he will give it to the Assembly. Perhaps we require an explanation for that.

I am frustrated that we have not been able to do this. The people who scrutinise our budgets want to have the information. The Assembly should not be afraid to give that information, but it is not being done, and I hope that it will be.

I can barge all I want, and the more I barge the more intransigent people will be, but when people want transparency, we are prepared to give it to them. If there is a roadblock to that, it is my duty as a Minister to say where the roadblock lies. It does not lie with my Department. Indeed, the Committee for Finance and Personnel has been very helpful because it has agreed the kind of information that is required, but that has not come to fruition in departmental presentations.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his statement and for giving us some time to read it, which was helpful. I share the views that have been expressed about the review of financial processes being frustrated. It reflects very poorly on government that we cannot move something as important as that forward.

When it comes to transparency, however, the investment package that was announced last week comprised an amount of Barnett consequentials. Will the Minister spell out the detail of those consequential credits to us during the year?

Mr Wilson: The Barnett consequentials represented money that was allocated for this year, next year and the following year, and they amounted to about £179 million. That came from a range of sources.

On UTV the other evening, I heard John Simpson say that we do not want jam tomorrow; we want jam today because the problems exist now, and we should spend it all now. Those Barnett consequentials, of course, are made available to the Assembly on the basis that there will be certain years to which they apply. So, the money that applies in 2013-14 and 2014-15 cannot be brought forward to be spent in this year.

We get a consequence from Westminster if, for example, additional money is being spent on transport in England and Wales. We get a certain percentage of that; I think that it is 2·3%. The money has to be spent in the year for which it has been allocated in other parts of the United Kingdom.

The new money amounts to £179·1 million, but it is spread over three years. That is why we had to spread that spending over three years and could not do it all in one year. To argue for doing it all now — jam tomorrow is no good; we want jam today — is not possible given the way in which the money was allocated to us.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. Tá ceist bheag agam air faoi thábla C.

I thank the Minister for his statement. My question concerns table C of the statement, which outlines reduced requirements. From that, I see that the Department for Social Development (DSD) is returning £8 million from the social housing rebuild programme, with nearly five months of the year still left. Does the returning of that money represent the cancellation of the 100-house phase 1 of the Girdwood newbuild that was planned by previous Ministers?

Mr Wilson: No, it does not. The reduced requirement is a result of housing associations not being able, for one reason or another, to spend the money in this year. I welcome the

fact that the Minister for Social Development has trawled through the information that was available to him and scrutinised what spending is likely to happen. People will, of course, hold on to money as long as they can, and, in the past, this would probably have been left until the February monitoring round, when it was too late.

The Minister for Social Development, as a result of work that he has done with housing associations, identified that they could not spend that money for whatever reason. I do not know what the reasons are or whether we are getting all of the full reasons. I know that there has been resistance from some housing associations. As their grants have gone down, they simply decided that, rather than putting in more of their own money, they would not build houses. If that is the case, the housing associations have to be pushed on it. In some cases, it might be as a result of not having planning permissions through or tender documents out. If that is the case, I would have thought that there was probably still enough time left in the year. For whatever reason, the Minister has given the money back.

The Member should note that the money will not be lost to housing. We have allocated the money to a sector that we believe can spend it, namely affordable co-ownership housing. Whether a house is built as a social house or a co-ownership house, the building will still take place. The private sector will welcome that further injection. The difference is that money spent on co-ownership housing draws in additional finance. The banks provide at least 50% of the mortgage, so you double the money. The Co-ownership Housing Association can draw down loans on the basis of money that we give them. So the £8 million that will go to co-ownership in this year can expand to nearly £20 million.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the statement, specifically the news that money will be set aside to address the potential shortfall in housing benefit rates and the allocation to the economy and jobs initiative. Given the danger of further spending cuts from the UK Government, is the Finance Minister confident that all the spending proposals and the current overcommitment will be sustainable over the lifespan of the current Budget?

Mr Wilson: We have to work on the basis of the money allocated to us. One thing that I would not like us to do is to hold back on spending through trying to anticipate, for example, whether the financial statement that the Chancellor will make at Westminster in

December is likely to include further changes and downward Barnett consequentials, which I think is what the Member is referring to. The schemes funded here have been scrutinised. Do not forget that some of them were rejected for the very reason that the Member gave: we were not sure that some could be delivered on time or that they were sufficiently robust.

We still have flexibility over the next two years of the Budget. If the reduced requirements and the monitoring rounds produce the same amount of resources as they did in the past, we will have some flexibility to play with. We carry over resources, and we have the ability to carry over £52 million and £11 million of capital and current spending from one year to the next, which gives us a degree of flexibility. We did that this year, and we intend to do it next year. If we get the additional flexibility for capital moneys that I have sought from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, that will give us some scope there as well. I am convinced that we have sufficient flexibility through the monitoring rounds, the money that we carry forward as a prudent exercise and the additional flexibility that we seek from the Treasury.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his statement. I refer him to the penultimate page of his statement, which mentions the £200 million for the economy and jobs initiative. One concern that has been raised is that that is simply recycled money that is in the system already. Will the Minister clarify the extent to which that is additional new money and to what extent it is a reallocation of money from existing budgets?

Mr Wilson: It is not all reallocated money, and I have already given a figure to the Assembly for the significant Barnett consequentials that were made during this financial year and the impact that they will have in this and the next two years. However, even if the £200 million were all the result of reallocations, I cannot see where there is an issue.

Members can look at the table for administration costs, etc. If the money had been a result of greater efficiency in delivering services in Northern Ireland and cutting administration costs, which some of it is, that would have been a good thing. It would mean slimmer and more efficient government and the ability to put money into front line resources. Had it been the result of Ministers simply saying, "Look, the big priority at the moment is to do what we can to alleviate the distress caused by the recession, so are there lower priority programmes in my Department that can wait so that we can address the immediate

issues that affect our constituents?", that would also have been a good thing. Some of the money is due to some of those things. Had the £200 million simply been the result of Ministers doing things now that they were going to do in two years' time because they will have a great impact now, that would have been good.

Those three elements account for some of the money. However, a large proportion of it is due to additional funding that enables us to do things that we had not planned in the Budget and that Ministers had identified as new things that they wanted to do or extensions of things that they are doing at present that are working and are addressing problems.

Whenever we make an announcement that reflects a genuine effort by the Executive to try to improve the situation, I find it intolerable that the first thing that some of the commentators in Northern Ireland do is pick over it to see what bad news they can find, rather than presenting it as positive work by the Assembly. There are times when we get things wrong, and we deserve to get beaten for it. However, whenever we get it right, the least that we deserve is a bit of credit.

Ms Ruane: The Minister said that whenever people get things right, they deserve a bit of credit. On that note, does he agree that John O'Dowd and, indeed, previous Education Ministers fought very hard for funding for the building of schools and the schools estate. I know that old habits die hard, but I wonder whether the Minister wakes up in the morning thinking, "How am I going to get at Sinn Féin today?" That is what it seems like from this side of the House. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: I am coming to my question. Does the Minister agree that the money that John O'Dowd secured for maintenance is very important for the schools estate?

Mr Wilson: I am surprised at the Member's response, because if she thinks that I wake up in the morning wondering how I can get at Sinn Féin, she must think I lead a very sad life. That is not what I do. Indeed, if one looks at the statement, one would see that I have a funny way of getting at Sinn Féin — it has about £130 million worth of getting at Sinn Féin and the Education Minister. There is £90 million directly for the schools budget, £10 million for capital investment next year for schools maintenance and money for schools maintenance this year. I am trying to quickly add it all up, but it all

amounts to well over £120 million. So, I do not think that the Member can honestly say that I look for ways of getting at Sinn Féin.

I have my difficulties with some Sinn Féin Ministers, as I do with lots of other Ministers, including some of those from my own party, but I emphasise that judgements will not be made on the basis of whether I do or do not get on with a Minister. Judgements will be made on the basis of whether we have money and whether there is a problem. If a Minister presents a problem and makes a case justifying the need for extra money, I do not care what party they come from.

12.45 pm

Mr McQuillan: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I welcome the additional £8 million for the housing co-ownership scheme, which will give the construction sector a boost. We cannot do that on our own. Minister, have you had any conversations with the banks so that they can buy into that project?

Mr Wilson: We have. Indeed, the Minister for Social Development and I did so before we decided to put the money in.

The Member makes a very important point that there is no point in us putting money into the Co-ownership Housing Association when at least half the value of the house has to be financed through a mortgage. In some cases, if people go for a lower percentage, they will require an even greater mortgage. Therefore, before we put the money into the Co-ownership Housing Association, we had meetings with the banks. We told them that we were going to do this and that we were going to give a long-term commitment so that it was not just a one-off and worth their while setting up schemes to make mortgages available to people. We also made the point that, under co-ownership, all the risk of a new house is carried by the Co-ownership Housing Association, because it takes the first hit if the equity value goes down. Therefore, there is no reason for banks to ask people who apply for mortgages under co-ownership for a deposit. We now have a commitment from the banks that not only will they match all the finance that we put in but will give 100% mortgages to successful applicants. That, of course, is a big boost, and it means that we lever in at least as much money as, and possibly more than, we are putting into the scheme from the banks alone.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the Minister's statement, in which he has allocated a further £14.3 million

towards health to address the necessary pseudomonas investment and to try to reduce the growing waiting lists.

Will the Minister accept that confusion can be created when reannouncements occur, such as the invest-to-save allocation for Transforming Your Care, which was agreed by the Executive in September? However, the 11 pages of tables do not include a simple table to illustrate where the all the money is coming from, and we have had to ask questions about Barnett consequentials.

Mr Wilson: The tables do explain where the money is coming from. I also explained that in my statement, so it is explained in figures and explained in writing. Some of it is money that we have from the invest-to-save fund. Some of it comes from Departments' reduced requirements. Some of it is from Barnett consequentials. Some of it is from spending that we are bringing forward from future years because we want to do the capital schemes now. Northern Ireland Water capital schemes are an example of that.

Therefore, the tables do show where the money is coming from, and I refer the Member to the appropriate tables. The money that has come from reduced requirements is outlined in table C. Reallocations are outlined in table D. Reclassifications are outlined in table E. Where the money is going to as a result of the bids submitted is shown in table F, and the allocations that were made are shown in table G. Even the administration costs that have been saved are shown in table H. All the tables outline the information that the Member has asked for. I hope that there is as much transparency there as we can possibly give.

I thought that Members would have welcomed the invest-to-save money. For £23.6 million, we will make savings in the health budget on a year-on-year basis of £27 million. That is a good return and one of the reasons that the Health Minister was allocated the money. Of course, that £27 million saving every year means that there is more money to go into front line services. The money that is going into elective care will, according to the information that I have been given, deal with waiting lists of up to 3,000 patients in orthopaedics, 2,600 in general surgery, 1,000 inpatient and day cases, 2,700 ophthalmology cases and 300 inpatient cases. The numbers are in the thousands. I accept that that detail is not in the paper. However, it is the kind of detail that I would expect the Health Minister to give to his Committee. The money has been allocated: what will be done with it? This is the

information that he has given to me. Thousands of people will be taken off the waiting lists as a result of the £14 million allocation in the statement today.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. Has any analysis been undertaken of the percentage change from the original budget allocation for each Department? What sort of lessons are being gleaned?

Mr Wilson: I said in the statement that some Departments are going to lose some money as a result of this, and that others would gain. The Departments that will have their budgets reduced are listed in the statement: the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the DRD and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Those were the three main Departments that were going to have money reallocated. The winners in this were going to be the Department of Education and, if I remember rightly, the Department of Health. We have allocated money to those Departments, and it has been done on the basis of what reduced requirements there were and what we see for the future. As I said to the House already, it does not preclude giving priority in future monitoring rounds to the Departments that may have had reallocations in this exercise, should we find that the situation changes and they need further money.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): The Minister should be aware that there is nothing new about republicans giving information to the British Government. They did it for 40 years, given the number of spooks and spies that were inside their organisations.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member must ask a question.

Mr Storey: I welcome the Minister's statement. On behalf of the Education Committee, I welcome the £8.3 million that has been allocated to the Department for the maintenance of the education estate, and to address the consequences of the serious fire at Arvalee Special School in Omagh.

I also welcome the fact that the Committee will now see the transfer of the £15 million and the £75 million to the Department, albeit with the caveat that the Minister has given about the issue of transparency. Will he outline for us the issue with regard to the review of the EMA and what the consequences of the failure to progress that issue will be to the overall budget

position, given the fact that it was agreed by the Executive?

Mr Wilson: On the first two issues that the Member has raised, the bid for capital works in schools is a bid for capital works in schools and, therefore, the money will have to be spent for that purpose.

The £90 million allocation is to deal with the reductions that would have been made to school budgets and which schools have now been told will not have to be made. Schools have already budgeted for this, because that assurance was given to the Minister. We could not do it at the time the assurance was given because we had to give some certainty to schools' boards of governors, headmasters and headmistresses who were worried about the future and what cuts they would have to make. Would they have to make staff redundant? We gave them an early assurance that that would not have to happen. However, it was a funding pressure that we knew we would have to address. We have now addressed it as we promised we would.

I cannot now remember the other point that the Member made.

Mr Storey: It was about the EMA.

Mr Wilson: As I said already, I am disappointed that we have not had the progress on the EMA that we had anticipated.

The Executive took a decision in January that they would not increase student fees by more than the rate of inflation. That left a pressure that had to be funded. All other Departments have already had their budgets reduced in order to fund that pressure, but, because of the pressures it faced at that particular time, the Department of Education indicated that it could not possibly face it. So, the Executive agreed that, since there was a large amount of the EMA that was targeted at people who did not need it, and that there was a lot of dead weight in it, there would be a review of the EMA. Whatever savings there would be from that, on a pro rata basis, would be made available to pay the Department of Education's contribution towards holding student fees at no more than the rate of inflation.

There has been significant feet-dragging on that. The consultation is now finished, and a decision has to be made by December. The Executive's position still remains, which is that if that decision is not made and the savings are not realised, Education will have to find the

savings from its own budget. Therefore, it is up to the Minister to behave responsibly. If he does not want schools to suffer, he has to make the necessary decisions to target EMA provision much more efficiently, in order to make the savings that then enable his Department to have financed its contribution towards the decision on student fees.

Mr Campbell: In his statement, the Minister outlined the saving on the A5 of £10 million a month, culminating, probably, in a total of £50 million. Can he give the House and the wider community an assurance that there is no risk of the money being lost and returned to the Treasury?

Mr Wilson: Once the Regional Development Minister raised the issue, we immediately contacted the Treasury, and my officials had conversations with Treasury officials.

There is a particular difficulty in carrying money forward, because the Treasury does not want that kind of loose arrangement where regional Administrations simply decide that they are not going to spend the money this year and that they will carry it forward and build up a big pot of money that, presumably, would be used in election year to give out goodies to the electorate. That is the thinking of the cynics in the Treasury. Of course, we would never, ever think of doing that, Mr Speaker. Anyhow, the cynics in the Treasury thought that that was a possibility, so they gave us no ability to carry money over, which was an absolute nonsense. It did not even allow you to efficiently manage resources, because you could not always be sure that something would not happen towards the end of the year that you could not spend all the money. The Treasury wants to avoid going back to that free-for-all.

We believe that we have designed a proposal that is so unique to this project and to Northern Ireland that neither Wales nor Scotland could say that they wanted the same. I talked over the details of it when I met the First Secretary to the Treasury on Thursday, and I am fairly hopeful that we will get a positive response from Treasury, but only on this one particular issue of flexibility.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his statement. In the welcome package towards boosting our economy and supporting jobs, which measures does he believe will have the most long-lasting effect from the package?

Mr Wilson: The ones that will have the most long-lasting effect are some of the employment

ones. The thing that enables us to sell Northern Ireland is the quality of our workforce. Although we talk about the quality of our workforce, we have to accept that there are skills shortages and that there are areas where we have been successful in attracting inward investment and promoting local investment. However, as we do that, we need more people to be employed in those sectors.

Therefore, the money that has been allocated towards extending apprenticeship schemes and making it easier and cheaper for employers to take on apprentices; the money available for graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects and PhDs in those areas that we have targeted as growth areas in the economy that will have a long-lasting effect; and some of the money that we have designed to spend on infrastructure will help build up the infrastructure base that makes it easier for industry to locate, transport goods, communicate, etc. For me, those are the ones which will have the greatest long-term effect.

However, we must also recognise that there are short-term problems, such as the young people who do not have a job and those over 50 who have been put out of work and find it hard to get back into work. That is why those short-term measures of 26 weeks are important to, at least, get people into the job market. The Member will know, from his own constituency, that the support for small business in the centre of town and the raising of the £15,000 NAV threshold will bring an extra 3,500 businesses into the 20% reduction in rates.

That will be an important reduction in overheads for many of those businesses, and it just might help them to weather the current recession.

1.00 pm

Mr B McCrea: Following on the point about youth unemployment and skills, I refer the Minister to the penultimate page of his statement. Earlier in his statement, the Minister berated a commentator for looking for jam today rather than following the profile. Can he explain to me why youth unemployment was allocated £5.8 million in June but the Barnett consequential from the youth contract for 2012 was £10.2 million? There is a difference there. Following on from that, the paragraph dealing with the economy and jobs initiative states that the Executive have set aside £70 million over the next two years, in addition to co-ownership, acceleration and various other things. What will that £70 million be spent on? I looked at the

tables, and I could not see how it related to employment and learning.

Mr Wilson: First of all, the money that is allocated this year is money on top of what the Department for Employment and Learning is already using to address youth unemployment. I do not want to mislead the House, but I think that the Department for Employment and Learning's total additional bid for dealing with youth unemployment was about £36 million, so it has got additional money over the three years. That is on top of the schemes that are already in place, which were being financed as a result of money we had available to us.

I move now to the £70 million. I do not want to read out a long list of how the money will be spent, but it is divided between resource and capital. Let me give some examples of the things that we are talking about. In respect of supporting people, we have the First Start initiative, the Step Ahead programme for the 50+, the undergraduate STEM places, the increased funding for FE and 150 additional PhD places. Those are not in the statement. If the Member is looking for them, he will find that they are not there. I do not want him to think that I am misleading him and wonder what I am reading from. To support businesses, there is a moratorium on car parking charges and the increase in the NAV in the rates element. In supporting investment, there is £10 million for the additional maintenance of schools next year and the updating of tourist facilities, caravan sites and forest parks. There is a range of things. I do not know for certain, but I am sure that that information is available in the written statement that was produced by the Executive after the Executive meeting. I think it came out on Friday.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. As a member of the Health Committee, I especially welcome the additional £14.3 million for health. Can the Minister advise what the additional funding for the Ulster Hospital will mean for the long-term development of the Ulster Hospital site?

Mr Wilson: The additional funding is for the Tor Bank site. As the Member will know, the school there has been knocked down. Additional car parking is needed for the hospital, and anyone who drives up the road towards Newtownards will see how much that is needed, because cars are parked along the East Link Road towards the Ice Bowl etc at Dundonald. So it is to include greater car parking facilities in the hospital grounds, so that people are not forced to park on the road when they visit relatives and

to allow staff to find places in the hospital grounds. As the hospital is expanding, it, of course, requires more car parking. The Tor Bank site is next door, and the £4 million is for that.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the statement by the Minister. I encourage him to complete the review of financial processing. It is important for the Executive going forward. Can the Minister give an assurance that the Executive are still committed to building the two roads, as outlined? Will the Minister further agree that the funding for the A5 and A8 was project-specific, as outlined by the Treasury, and that that, hopefully, can still be maintained?

Mr Wilson: I hope that I have given the assurance. Let us look at the two things that I said about the A5 and A8. First of all, £31 million that could not be spent this year has been allocated to capital projects so that there can be work for the construction industry in Northern Ireland Water projects and road maintenance. That money was given on the strict understanding that, since it was money that would have been spent by the Water Service and Roads Service next year, it will be transferred to the scheme next year and the year after as it is required. We have gone to considerable lengths, as I have outlined to the Assembly already, to negotiate with the Treasury a carry-over of £50 million so that that is not lost. That will be available to spend in the last year of the scheme, when, of course, the shortfall would have occurred because of the delay at the start of the scheme. In the ingenuity we have tried to show in persuading the Treasury and getting it over the line and in the commitment we have given that any money brought forward from the A5 project for spend on other projects this year must be returned to the scheme next year, there can be no greater indication of our commitment to complete the project.

Mr Craig: I welcome the Minister's statement, especially what he said around the additional £15 million and £75 million for education. However, does the Minister agree that that is a bit like the headmaster rewarding the pupil for playing truant? Does he agree that, if the Department got its act together and gave the Minister proper information, any increase, especially in the maintenance budget for schools, would not only have a beneficial effect on school property but boost small to medium-sized businesses, which, at the minute, are struggling in our economy?

Mr Wilson: There has been no attempt to reward a Minister who has not been playing ball in producing financial information or scrutinising the financial operations in their Department. At the end of the day, I have to make a judgment and the Executive have to make a judgment on what the needs of the education sector are. I will have the most robust debates with the Minister in private and in public, and I will, I am sure, annoy him in public by some of the things I say. However, let me make it clear that we will not make decisions on the basis of how I as Finance Minister get on with other Ministers. We will make decisions on the basis of what the needs presented are. Needs were presented. I know, because I spoke to principals in my constituency, that schools would have found it almost impossible to make an 11% reduction in their budget over the period of the Budget. For that reason, additional money was found. There is a big backlog of maintenance in the schools sector of over £300 million. We do not want buildings to deteriorate to the point where they cannot be used for the purpose for which they are required or, indeed, to incur even more maintenance because they get so bad and damaged as a result of that. On that basis, additional money was made available. However, that is not rewarding any wayward Minister, by any means. It is a sensible allocation of resources to a problem that has been identified and needs to be addressed.

Mr Allister: Was the Minister's thunder stolen last week because the First Minister and deputy First Minister wanted the glory of the announcement before they went off to China? Or was the announcement made because the Executive could not trust some of their own members not to leak the details between last Wednesday and today?

On the issue of the rightful criticism that the Minister made of Sinn Féin's blocking of the review of financial processes and, I suspect, the roll-out of further announcements on the Budget for 2013-14 and 2014-15 and the EMA, am I reading the statement correctly when I discover, from table C and elsewhere, that not a single Sinn Féin Department surrendered any money or admitted to having any reduced requirements, yet all of them got handsome increases in their allocations? Is that correct?

Mr Wilson: If one looks at the reduced requirements, one will see that OFMDFM has shown a number of reduced requirements. There was also a reduction, in table D, and movements of money within the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. The Departments that have made reduced requirements are spread across a number of

parties — for example, the Alliance Party. The SDLP, as has been pointed out, and Ulster Unionist Departments have not shown reduced requirements, but, nevertheless, we make a judgement not on the Minister but on whether Departments have underspends. If they have not spent money at the end of a year, it will show as an underspend, which is when real criticism will come in. However, my officials and accounting officers in other Departments are constantly going backwards and forwards between each other. We are satisfied that the reduced requirements shown in the statement reflect genuine reduced requirements.

The Member made a point about my thunder or glory being stolen by the statement being made on Thursday evening rather than today. I do not think that it is a question of glory for any individual Minister. The Executive made a collective decision. Despite what UTV reported, the announcement was not delayed because Ministers could not agree and were squabbling about how the money would be spent. In September, we decided that we had to do something, and, by October, we had a comprehensive package, which was made public. How and why it was made public at the time that it was is not a matter of great concern. The important thing is that we now have a programme that will help thousands of people to get work. It will help many small businesses and construction firms. That is how the package should be judged, not on how it was announced or who got the opportunity or glory of announcing it.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I heard the Minister's response to Gordon Dunne's question about the Ulster Hospital site. The Minister quite rightly said that it would be used for car parking. Is the Minister aware that there is also provision —

Mr Speaker: Order. Questions on the ministerial statement have ended. That is not a point of order. Let us move on.

Executive Committee Business

Local Government (Indemnities for Members and Officers) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I beg to move

That the draft Local Government (Indemnities for Members and Officers) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The order is made under article 33 of the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. Article 33(3) of the order provides that a draft of the order must be laid before and approved by a resolution of the Assembly. The purpose of the draft order is to permit councils to provide indemnities to any of their members or officers. The Department consulted on the draft order from December 2009 to March 2010. The Department received 18 responses, none of which opposed the proposals. Clearly, some time has elapsed between the end of the consultation and the order coming before the Chamber. I will address that matter in my later comments.

Given the developing and innovative ways in which district councils have sought to carry out their functions, they have in the past raised concerns regarding the extent to which they can indemnify their members and officers against personal liability. All of us in the Chamber, including you, Mr Speaker, who are or were councillors, especially going back some time, will know how significantly the work of councils has adjusted over the decades, to the point where council members who sat on bodies outside the council may have had issues of liability. We are trying to address that matter now and in anticipation of the review of public administration, when councillors' responsibilities, including being involved in external third-party organisations and companies, may become more significant. The main concern that was raised was about instances in which councils have appointed members and officers as members of other bodies such as partnerships, regeneration initiatives and companies that councils have established or participated in, which has given life to the quality of this regulation.

1.15 pm

Legislation that has established bodies requiring council representation, such as the policing and community safety partnerships, has often given councils explicit powers to provide indemnities. The draft order will supplement those powers in cases in which no such provision exists in relation to a council function.

Councils should seek clarity from partner organisations at an early stage on where responsibility for indemnity lies in order to avoid duplication and convey that information to their members and officers. That is very good advice. Given the range of partnership arrangements between councils, councillors and third-party organisations, people should interrogate third-party organisations and themselves to determine where liability indemnity begins and ends.

The order also proposes to prohibit councils from using the powers within it to meet the costs of members and officers taking legal action for slander or libel either directly or through insurance. That said, there may be provision in the order to allow members to defend themselves when party to an action of slander or libel but not to initiate slander or libel actions. That may be a regret to some Members, I do not know. The Department does not believe that individuals should be funded at public expense to bring proceedings against third parties, as to do so could stifle legitimate public debate — never mind open the door. Councils will, however, be able, as I said, to provide indemnities to individuals against the cost of defending themselves in such actions when the actions relate to their official functions.

I want to make it clear that this does not give councillors a licence to do what they want in third-party organisations of which they might be a member. If, for example, a member acted fraudulently, recklessly or, indeed, criminally, he or she could not rely on indemnity in those circumstances. Therefore, indemnity is subject to certain hurdles and tests. It is not an open door for councillors to behave as they might wish without repercussions. The order will extend indemnity provisions to people who were councillors and have now stepped down for actions that may have arisen when they were in that role. Provisions will also extend to non-council members or staff who sit on committees where the indemnity provisions may kick in.

The proposed order mirrors the legislation available to local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales. The enabling power for

the order was introduced in the Local Government (Northern Ireland) Order 2005, but the order is only being made now. As I said, it might be helpful if I set out the reasons for that. Although I will outline those reasons, it is accepted in the Department — certainly by me — that it should have been brought to the Chamber before now, some 30 months after the consultation ended. Although I will explain the process between then and now, certainty should have been created before now to allow the matter to be brought before the House.

The story from March 2010 until now is as follows. First, the Department was taking forward other legislation on which the indemnity provisions could have a bearing, namely the power for councils to establish or participate in companies for the purposes of carrying out their functions, for which legislation was made in January 2007; the issue of whether councils and waste groups have the necessary vires to enable them to enter long-term service contracts with the private sector; and to address concerns that contractors and financiers might have about such contracts, for which legislation was made in 2012. That is a very important matter given what may happen in the waste procurement process and the scale of the contracts, both in duration and cost. It is important that the issue of indemnity and the waste procurement groups was interrogated. However, that in itself should not have given rise to the scale of the delay that we experience today. In the Department, at a certain stage, it was considered prudent to wait until those issues had been resolved and to take account of ongoing developments in other jurisdictions before making the regulation. Secondly, the need to seek legal advice on issues raised as part of the consultation contributed to the delay. As we know, lawyers are not always the most prompt in giving their advice. Thirdly, there were competing legislative priorities of which Members will be aware, not least the drafting of a wide body of legislation, some of which will come before the Assembly in the near future, in respect, not least, of local government reform. I ask the Assembly to approve the draft order.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): The Committee considered initial proposals for the regulations almost three years ago at its meeting on 3 December 2009. Members welcomed the proposals and were content for the Department to proceed with the policy.

As we heard, the rule will make provision for circumstances in which a council may indemnify some or all of its members or officers. It enables the council to provide indemnity by

securing an insurance policy for members or officers and sets out the cases in which indemnities may be provided. It also allows indemnity to cover officials carrying out a function on behalf of the local authority.

Members noted that the need for the legislation was identified many years ago. It has become even more important as we move towards larger councils with greater powers. We need to ensure that councils have the ability to use these powers in innovative ways to deliver high-quality and cost-effective services. The protection that the rule provides will help councils to do that.

Powers have existed in Northern Ireland since 1972 to enable councils to indemnify their officers and members. However, councils have long been concerned about the extent to which those powers could be applied to officers and members whenever they were acting or taking decisions as members of other bodies to which the council had appointed them. The Committee was, therefore, pleased to hear that, in bringing forward the regulations, the Department would overcome those doubts by ensuring that councils will be able, at their discretion, to provide indemnity that is wide-ranging and applicable to all members and officers wherever they conduct their responsibilities. However, the Committee welcomes the fact that some restrictions will be in place. For example, indemnity will not be available to cover a case in which an individual has acted fraudulently or recklessly, as the Minister indicated, nor will it extend to any liability arising from an action or failure to act that constitutes a criminal offence. It is reasonable to expect that members and officers can rely on indemnities that have been funded directly by their council only where they have acted honestly and in good faith.

The Examiner of Statutory Rules considered the draft statutory rule in his fourth report to the Assembly for session 2012-13, which was published on 24 October 2012. He had no issues to bring to the Committee's attention.

The Committee considered the draft rule at its meeting on 18 October 2012. Although the Committee was concerned at the significant time that it had taken the Department to bring the rule forward, members welcomed it and were content for me to recommend to the Assembly that the rule be affirmed.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom cúpla focal a rá. I want to say a few words on this.

Obviously, this has been in the pipeline for a number of years, as it is three years since it first came to the Committee. The order will give more clarity and surety to local councils and officers. It will bring a wee bit of confidence to councils, especially in the run-in to the new council structures and formations. So, with that, I support the order.

Mr Attwood: First, as always — well, nearly always — I thank the Committee for its contribution to these matters and, indeed, to the order. As the Chair and Mr Boylan indicated, there has been some delay, but, to be fair, this has not been an acute matter over the past period. I acknowledge that the order should have been brought forward earlier, but, as far as I am aware, subject to what the councils may say, it has not been one of the most pressing issues. I agree with Mr Boylan that this will create confidence and certainty and avoid doubt.

The Committee Chair made a curious and relevant point when she said that the order was important now because, in future, councils might find innovative ways in which to work with others to develop local council areas. Over the next three years and beyond, that issue will become more and more relevant. Are there opportunities, ways and means and models for councils to draw down extra funds, without placing any undue burden on the life of councils or any particular cost on ratepayers, to initiate and drive development in their communities?

I also acknowledge the Committee Chair's point, which is another good point, that, where councillors or members of staff engage honestly, reasonably and in good faith in a proper council function with, let us say, a third-party organisation but, in doing so, act beyond their particular powers, that sort of action beyond their competence is, nonetheless, captured by the order. Therefore, it protects councillors, former councillors and staff in taking forward the work of a council with other organisations, but — I give this warning — if they are fraudulent, reckless or guilty of criminal behaviour, they will not have indemnity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Local Government (Indemnities for Members and Officers) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Committee Business

Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr D Bradley (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill [NIA Bill 12/11-15].

Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an rún a mholadh. Cuireadh críoch leis an Dara Céim den Bhille Stát Seirbhíse (Comhairleoirí Speisialta) ar an 25 Meán Fómhair, agus fágadh faoin Choiste Airgeadais agus Pearsanra é le haghaidh na Céime Coiste.

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

The Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill completed its Second Stage on 25 September and was referred to the Committee for Finance and Personnel for its Committee Stage. In broad terms, the Bill provides that no person shall hold the post of special adviser if he or she has what is termed a "serious criminal conviction", which is defined as one carrying a custodial sentence of five years or more. It requires the Department of Finance and Personnel to publish a code of appointment for special advisers, a code of conduct for special advisers and an annual report about the number and cost of special advisers. It also removes the Speaker from the list of office holders who are entitled to appoint a special adviser to the Civil Service.

1.30 pm

Having been notified at its meeting on 5 September that should the Bill pass its Second Stage it would stand referred to the Committee unless the Assembly otherwise ordered, the Committee invited the Bill's sponsor, Mr Allister, QC, MLA, to give evidence on the provisions of the Bill at the Committee's meeting on 19 September. Evidence was also invited from the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in view of the functions to be conferred on that Department. Additionally, the Attorney General was invited to address early concerns regarding legislative competence, in particular, potential

non-compliance with human rights requirements. Those were useful sessions, which helped in informing Members in advance of the Second Stage debate.

Following the Bill's referral to the Committee, a public call for evidence was issued. In response, the Committee received more than 860 responses from individuals and organisations. The Committee has identified a range of organisations and witnesses from which it plans to take oral evidence. Although some have to be confirmed, it is expected that the evidence sessions will continue until the Christmas recess. As is the normal protocol with an Executive Bill, the Committee is also likely to invite the Bill's sponsor to respond to any issues raised in the evidence. I expect that Mr Allister will shortly receive communication in that regard. In addition, the Committee may seek legal advice on aspects of the Bill.

Members will be aware from the Second Stage debate that differing views were expressed on the Bill and concerns and issues highlighted. The Committee wishes to take the time to undertake robust scrutiny of the Bill and, therefore, agreed at its meeting on 24 October to seek an extension of the Committee Stage until 15 February 2013. That will allow time for all the oral evidence to be taken; for the Committee to consider in detail the issues arising from the evidence; for all necessary advice to be received, for the clause-by-clause scrutiny to be completed; and for the Committee report to be agreed.

I have no doubt that the Committee will report to the Assembly in advance of 15 February, if practicable. Therefore, I ask the House to support the motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 15 February 2013 in relation to the Committee Stage of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Bill [NIA Bill 12/11-15].

Private Members' Business

Boxing

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business on the Order Paper is the motion regarding funding for boxing. As two amendments have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion has 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and a further five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Miss M McIlveen: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the recent announcement by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to funding for boxing; acknowledges the boxing strategy being developed by Belfast City Council in conjunction with Sport NI and the club development plan being produced by the Ulster provincial boxing council; recognises that there is a need to develop boxing in working-class Protestant areas; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated equitably across communities to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities.

I have come under a certain amount of criticism for tabling the motion. I have been accused of seeking to positively discriminate in favour of Protestants and of effectively being sectarian. That is simply not the case. The purpose of the motion is to seek to ensure that the opportunities and benefits that boxing affords can be enjoyed across Northern Ireland.

The problems faced by Sandy Row boxing club are well-documented, have been discussed at the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee and will continue to be scrutinised in the Assembly and the press. The issue of sectarianism and racism is not confined to Sandy Row or to boxing and needs to be removed from our society. In boxing, it needs to be addressed as a priority as it is a barrier to participation. The motion is primarily focused on funding and developing participation in the sport.

Despite negativity in recent months, Northern Ireland amateur boxing has much to be confident about. We returned two medallists from the Olympic Games, and we can look

forward to sending a strong team to the forthcoming Commonwealth Games. I want to see us building on the successes that we have had and perhaps regain some of the past glories — the achievements of Wayne McCullough and Carl Frampton spring to mind. We can look at the success of the Irish Republic's Katie Taylor as an inspiration to young women in Northern Ireland. Following the successes of Paddy Barnes and Michael Conlan, the Minister re-announced the provision of £3.27 million for local boxing, which is to be administered through Sport NI and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA).

Boxing in Ulster relies heavily on volunteers giving freely of their time. It goes without saying that a debt of thanks is owed to them for that. The Ulster Boxing Council (UBC) governs local boxing and is responsible for some 110 clubs, 86 of which are in Northern Ireland. The council is part of the IABA, which represents boxing on an all-island basis.

Following a report by Sport NI, UBC prepared an implementation plan for 2011-16 and a policy and procedure document to implement proper governance arrangements. The plan surveyed existing facilities, assessed the need for the development of coaches and officials, and set out key strategic objectives for Ulster boxing. Those were the development of coaches and officials, the development of governance practices to ensure that participation is open to all, and the support of a high performance programme.

The policies and procedures deal with various areas, including governance and accountability, risk management, child protection, and what the UBC describes as equity. In the equity section, UBC states that it is determined to ensure that all services and policies are fair and without discrimination. It also seeks to ensure that all who participate in the sport of amateur boxing reflect the diversity of background and culture in the province of Ulster. The equity policy fleshes out the steps to be taken to ensure that those who participate in the sport do not suffer discrimination, harassment or unfair treatment. That policy is backed up by IABA's disciplinary and grievance procedures. That, of course, is to be welcomed, but why has it taken so long?

Belfast City Council also approved the development of a boxing strategy, which was informed by the work that was being undertaken by UBC. A baseline assessment was undertaken, which, in addition to establishing the numbers involved in boxing and the key issues facing clubs, demonstrated the benefits and value of such clubs. Those

include: reducing antisocial behaviour by providing activities, particularly in deprived areas of the city; contributing to improved health; and increasing participation in physical activities. It also identified a gap in Access NI vetting of coaches and volunteers. The strategy is now subject to public consultation.

As a result, Sport NI and Belfast City Council are working together to establish a baseline standard for facilities and equipment. That should be in place for all boxing clubs at various levels. An action plan is being drawn up to outline what can be taken forward to meet the shortfalls in infrastructure and equipment in the Belfast area. That will then inform discussions with other Northern Ireland councils about boxing provision in their areas. Sport NI's boxing investment programme consultation is now open. Although the link-up with Belfast City Council is useful, boxing exists beyond Belfast. There is life beyond Belfast. I seek the assurance that Belfast will not soak up all of the investment. I want to see gaps in provision addressed right across Northern Ireland.

A general theme that runs through all of this is addressing inclusivity in the sport. Given the prominence of that, it is natural to infer that it is recognised as a problem. The Minister has acknowledged the need to promote inclusivity so that no one, regardless of community background, is discouraged from participating. I cannot stress enough the importance of UBC adopting the new equality standard for sport.

Boxing is more than a sport. It can act as a vehicle for the promotion of good relations, particularly in working-class areas. A difficulty in fully achieving that is the paucity of clubs in perceived Protestant areas. Historically, boxing clubs in Roman Catholic areas have been established along parish lines and have been a focal point for those communities. In many instances, the Catholic Church has granted land to the clubs, and this has proved to be a huge advantage for them. In west Belfast, for example, there are 11 clubs within a three-mile radius. Clubs in Protestant areas did not and do not enjoy such generosity. Those involved in boxing acknowledge that clubs in Protestant areas are poor at accessing funding opportunities and the lack of facilities exacerbates that. We are left with a position in which there are significantly fewer clubs in Protestant areas, and, therefore, fewer Protestants participating in the sport. However, it is felt that, if the facilities were there, there would be a demand.

One of the interesting aspects of some clubs is the diversity of what is on offer. Although they

are boxing clubs, they offer much more, such as engaging with young people from socially excluded communities and seeking to lower youth crime and address antisocial behaviour. They also seek to address underachievement in education, which is particularly prevalent among working-class Protestant boys.

One of the problems that could be foreseen with the funding is that, given the dominance of one community in the sport, it will entrench the situation. There needs to be promotion and encouragement of the sport in Protestant areas, particularly in working-class areas. I am not advocating an approach of build it and they will come. However, the strategy underpinning the investment needs to seek to develop boxing in those areas.

The perception that boxing belongs to only one community to the exclusion of the others needs to be addressed. In recent times, there has been a focus on addressing discrimination and harassment in the sport. The development of an equity policy by UBC is a huge step forward, but it needs to be enforced: words on a page are not enough. Perhaps future funding for individual clubs could be subject to anti-sectarian and anti-racism measures.

Disappointingly, increasing Protestant participation is not a key objective of the investment strategy. This investment offers the opportunity for that to be done. As one of the key objectives is to contribute to the social regeneration of deprived communities and to make improvements in the health and mental well-being of local communities, I would like some assurance that Protestant communities will not be by-passed in favour of the many established clubs in predominantly Roman Catholic areas.

I am pleased that another key objective is to encourage the involvement of women. I referred earlier to Katie Taylor, and the manner in which she won Olympic gold and the high regard in which she is held in the sport make her a fantastic role model for young women. I hope that, in providing investment in that area, her example will act as a catalyst for the development of women's boxing.

From a personal perspective, I would like a mapping exercise to be carried out. Questions need to be asked about whether there are too many clubs in a particular area and whether it is appropriate for all those clubs to receive funding while there are areas of need that are not being addressed. If there are too many clubs in an area, should a closer working relationship or merger be encouraged to

maximise the benefits of funding? Is it time to look at a centre of excellence for boxing? We need to look to see where there are gaps in provision and fill those.

A substantial amount of money is being invested in boxing, and it has been identified by the Minister as one of her priorities. There is a perception that the money will just go into north and west Belfast. The Minister needs to demonstrate that she acts for all of Northern Ireland. There are issues around sectarianism within the sport whether we care to admit it or not. Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club's report exemplifies that. The Minister needs to demonstrate that the processes are there to ensure that sectarianism has been taken out of the sport and that everyone who participates in it is free from intimidation and harassment. This is a test for the Minister. I do not want to see her fall short.

Mr Allister: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "notes" and insert

"with concern the findings of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club's (SRABC) recent report; further notes the recent announcement by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to funding for boxing; acknowledges the boxing strategy being developed by Belfast City Council in conjunction with Sport NI and the club development plan being produced by the Ulster provincial boxing council, but regrets the council's failure to address the issue of sectarianism highlighted in the report by SRABC; recognises that there is a need to develop boxing in working-class Protestant areas; calls for a Northern Ireland amateur boxing association to be established in order to afford boxers from Northern Ireland the opportunity to compete for the UK at international level; and further calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated equitably across communities to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities."

In moving amendment No 1, I make it clear that it does not detract at all from the content of the motion. In fact, it takes nothing from the motion but adds three items that I think are vital considerations for the debate. The first of those is recognition of the report from the Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club, which did a service to the sport in general by being prepared to have the courage to speak up about an issue which, in many cases, had been swept under the carpet

for too long. Therefore, amendment No 1, first, notes:

"with concern the findings of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club's...recent report".

Secondly, it regrets that the boxing authorities have failed to address the issue highlighted in that report.

1.45 pm

Thirdly, and very importantly, in looking forward to the future and the governance of boxing, it makes the elementary point that we need to have governance arrangements that are not one-sided and that afford to all unionists and nationalist boxing participants the opportunity to box under the colours of the country that they choose to box under. That is an important consideration, not just for boxing but for other sports.

My acquaintance with Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club goes back to when, as a Member of the European Parliament, I was invited to come and discuss some of the club's needs. I will never forget going into that club and having to negotiate my way round the buckets that were catching water from the ceiling. That need was self-evident and, happily, we were able to get some improvements moving. The second thing that struck me was the sheer dedication of the volunteers who run the club, and they are volunteers — people who needlessly give up night after night of their personal lives to try to equip, train and give an outlet to young people who would otherwise have a much worse, misspent youth. We all owe a debt of gratitude to people such as that.

It was clear then and has become clearer since that that was a club operating under a shadow of sectarian abuse. Its members participated in competitions in venues that were anything but neutral and in extremely hostile circumstances under which young people were repeatedly subjected to sectarian abuse. It has to be said that the Sandy Row club has tolerated that for many years. It has sought, through the processes within boxing, to draw that fact to the attention of the authorities. Only when all of that failed did it go public with its concerns. As I said, I think that we owe the club's members a debt of gratitude for their courage and strength in doing that. It is a matter of regret that, to this day, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association — despite its saying at the time of the report's publication in August that it would undertake a thorough investigation — has yet to speak to the Sandy Row management about the report's

contents. It matters far less, but, to this very day, the association has not even replied to a letter that I sent it in August to raise the issues. So, in that regard, there is feet-dragging, which is very regrettable.

I come to what I think is the important long-term issue, which is that of how boxing should be organised. We all observed and took pleasure from the Olympics in the summer. We saw the great affinity between people in every sport and the national pride that they took as their flag was run up the pole to mark the presentation of their medal. Yet, in boxing, as in other sports in Northern Ireland, if you are a participant who wishes to box for the United Kingdom because you regard it as the country of your birth and the country of your allegiance, you cannot do so because recognition is given only to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association. Therefore, you have to box on behalf of Ireland. That is wrong; it is a denial of people's fundamental rights. The House is highly populated by Belfast Agreement enthusiasts. Let me remind those enthusiasts that the Belfast Agreement stated that "the people of Northern Ireland" have the right:

"to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose".

It inexorably follows that that applies equally to the young Protestant boxer from Sandy Row who identifies himself as British, wants to fight and box for the British nation, wants to appear at the Olympics with the Union flag — not the Irish tricolour — going up the pole if he wins a medal, and asks why he is not allowed that basic human right that the Belfast Agreement is supposed to embrace.

That is why my amendment grapples with that issue and states that Northern Ireland needs a Northern Ireland federation of boxing to be established. I am not saying that it can be the only governance organisation, but it has to be there as a conduit and opportunity for young unionists who want to channel their talents into boxing for the United Kingdom. It has to be there to enable that to happen so that they can affiliate in that direction. It does not mean that the alternative arrangements cannot still be in place. There may be room for both, but there certainly is not room to exclude one section of the community and its political and constitutional affinity. That is what has been happening in boxing and, indeed, in other sports. That is something in the name of equality. Many Members hold themselves out as champions of equality, so here is an opportunity to demonstrate their credentials on

equality. Here is an opportunity to demonstrate that, when they espouse the principle that is supposedly in the Belfast Agreement of that equal right of expression, they are prepared to live up to it and to say to young boxers, young swimmers and others that of course they have the right to compete for their country, of course they have the right to take pride in their own flag, and of course they have the right to do what everyone else takes for granted. In the long term, that issue needs to be addressed.

We were told that sectarianism was a problem in soccer. That problem was addressed, in part by overseeing the governance arrangements and by the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) interfering in the governance arrangements. What is good enough for soccer —

Mr Humphrey: Football.

Mr Allister: What is good enough for football is good enough for boxing. Let us see the same proactive action so that young people who take pride in their boxing skills can indeed participate, free from the burden and the cloud of sectarian abuse that, as the Sandy Row report demonstrates, so many have been subjected to for so long. If those young people have the ability and achieve competition results, they can attain the ultimate and compete for and on behalf of their own nation, and instead of having to wrap themselves in an Irish tricolour when they do so, have the opportunity, as everyone else does, to take pride in their own flag. Is that too much to ask? I think not. The vote on the amendment will tell us whether that is too much to ask of the House.

Mrs McKeivitt: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "develop boxing" and insert

"; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated on the basis of need to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities and to ensure that all clubs uphold the highest standards of good relations and the equality standards in sport."

The SDLP amendment makes the motion much more inclusive and calls for every section of our society involved in boxing and in need of support to be considered and supported. The amendment also puts an onus on all clubs and organising bodies to uphold the highest standards of good relations and equality in boxing.

At this stage, it would be remiss of me not to mention the achievements of our amateur boxers at the Olympics in London earlier this year. They did us proud. In particular, local bronze medal winners Paddy Barnes and Michael Conlan kept us on the edge of our seats, and we know that they are capable of bringing home gold at the next Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Silver medallist John Joe Nevin, a member of the Travelling community, said that he wants the legacy of the games to be a closer relationship between Travellers and the settled community. I think that he has achieved that already. Gold medal winner Katie Taylor, a born-again Christian, is an inspirational individual who has excelled in her chosen sports, especially boxing. Her performance in the Olympics has motivated many young people, mostly young girls, to think about their well-being and to take up sport, particularly boxing.

Our Olympic medal winners already reflect the diverse backgrounds of boxing participants and champions. I am convinced that sticking with the original wording of the motion would be regrettable as it introduces an element of discrimination that is neither required nor desired.

Our amendment makes the fund available to everyone and may well set the standard for future motions. Can you imagine future debates in which all the proposals for support or funding are targeted at a particular section of our community?

I have, however, some concerns about the timeline of delivery for the boxing fund and about the capacity of clubs to make a successful bid. Since the fund was outlined to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in June and re-announced by Minister Ní Chuilín during the Olympics in August, movement has been slow. Sport NI's consultation on the boxing investment programme was released only on Friday last and runs until February next year.

Bearing in mind that the first year of the three-year plan ends in March, I do not think that it gives clubs that have expressed an interest a great deal of time to apply for equipment under the first tranche. I am also concerned that Belfast clubs have a massive head start on other clubs because Belfast City Council was able to start developing its strategy back in February.

There are clubs in premises that are not fit for use. My colleague Dominic Bradley and I visited boxing clubs in Newry and Mourne that

stuffed newspapers in the ceiling to keep the snow out while they were training. It did not stop them delivering their champions, however, which was a credit to the coaches and the dedication of the boxers.

I plead with those charged with developing the strategy and delivering the fund to move with haste to ensure that it is delivered fairly and across all sections of our community, but most importantly to simplify the process and make it accessible to every club, even those with limited form-filling capability.

I ask Members to support our amendment to ensure fairness for everyone in boxing, regardless of their creed or class. How heads-up was Barry McGuigan a number of years ago when he was boxing? We often spoke of the support that he received from Protestant and Catholic communities throughout his boxing career. McGuigan, born and reared to the Roman Catholic faith, never chose sides. Refusing to wear the green, white and gold, he became known as a non-sectarian sporting ambassador for Ireland. During the darkest days of the Troubles, Catholics and Protestants would say, "Leave the fighting to McGuigan", for which I admire him, because he does that to this day.

The Assembly must promote good community relations through sport. We must move away from the them-and-us attitude. We must stop seeing our sportsmen and women as wearing green, white and gold or red, white and blue; we must see them as athletes and champions.

If the Assembly gets the delivery of this welcome funding for boxing right, many clubs across the region will be able to reach the proper standard that we have today for coaching and which has given us champions. I ask the House to support our amendment.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an dara leasú agus in aghaidh an chéad leasaithe, agus tá cúpla focal le rá agam faoin mholadh fosta. I support amendment No 2, oppose amendment No 1 and have a few words to say about the motion.

When I first saw the motion, I was concerned about the line to which Mrs McKevitt referred, which mentions the development of boxing in working-class Protestant areas. I know that that would cause a lot of concern among some boxing clubs as well.

The second part of the motion, however, caused me equal concern. It asks the Minister

of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that funding is "allocated equitably across communities". Allocating funding equitably is not the same as allocating funding on the basis of equality. Funding should be allocated not because a club is Protestant or Catholic, unionist or nationalist, but regardless of it. It should also be allocated according to whether a club is urban or rural.

I will declare an interest because my son is a member of a local boxing club with which I have worked very closely down the years. It is a small, rural club, which, some 40-odd years ago, was founded by a few very far-sighted men who spotted an opportunity to acquire an old drill hut that belonged to the old Ulster Special Constabulary and put it to better use.

That sufficed for 20-odd years, even with its leaking roof, ropy floors and everything else. Despite the fact that it did not have the facilities, it produced some of the best champions that we have ever seen. Indeed, that small club holds nearly every title under the sun: county titles, Ulster titles, all-Ireland titles, British titles, Commonwealth titles, European titles and intercontinental titles. Indeed, had Eamonn O'Kane not gone professional last year, we probably would have had an Olympic title, and, had there not been a dodgy decision against Paul McCloskey in Manchester last year, we would have had a world title. That club has achieved all that without funding.

2.00 pm

When the Minister announced the £3.27 million of funding, it was welcomed with open arms in boxing circles. It added to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association's contribution of £1.5 million. As the motion recognises, central to all this is the contribution of Sport NI, the club development plans and the boxing strategies of both the Ulster Boxing Council and Belfast City Council. However, also relevant is the fact that a club development officer has been put in place. We have seen the benefits that that has brought to sports such as GAA, soccer, rugby and cricket.

I would like to refer to Mr Allister's amendment, which touches on a few points, including sectarianism. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure received a presentation from Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club. We are due to have presentations from other clubs, so there has not really been a right of reply yet on that point. The other side of Mr Allister's argument is that we should form a Northern Ireland boxing federation. I do not know whether he

has done the sums, but we are on an island of 7.5 million people as opposed to the neighbouring island, which has 75 million. Like many other sports, boxing has always been organised on an all-Ireland basis.

I had the pleasure of being invited to Ravenhill to watch Ulster demolish Edinburgh Friday a week ago. One of the senior officials said to us that rugby was organised on an all-Ulster — nine counties — and an all-Ireland basis and that that would not be changing any time soon. I think that that is positive, because people can throw their weight behind Ulster and Ireland, which I was very happy to do. It was pointed out to us on the night that, increasingly, those who support Ulster Rugby come from a GAA background.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. He is right about how rugby is governed. There is no difficulty with the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union. The difficulty is with the Irish Rugby Football Union based in Dublin. Whenever an Ireland game is played in this part of the United Kingdom, the Irish Rugby Football Union refuses to allow 'God Save the Queen', our national anthem, to be played or to allow the Union flag to be flown. It brings politics into sport.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I take the Member's point. However, I do not think that there was any problem when Ireland played South Africa on Saturday. Indeed, we saw every one of the South African players singing the new South African national anthem. Whenever you go to Dublin, you will see people of all political persuasions and of none supporting Ireland.

As regards governance and competition, it is advisable and probably preferable for boxing, like many other sports, to be organised on an all-Ireland basis. I hope that that will continue for many years to come. Back in May, I entertained Carl Frampton, Paul McCloskey and Eamonn O'Kane out on the steps here.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: They are positive role models in boxing, and I think that they are the examples that everybody else should follow.

Mr McGimpsey: I support the motion. I also support both amendments. I do not see a

contradiction between them, and I will speak to both of them.

It is important that we reflect the importance of sport. Just as we use cultural activities and artistic endeavour, we use sport to promote community development and inclusion, as well as individual and collective equality in our community. One of the things about sport — boxing is no exception — is that it promotes a healthy lifestyle and physical and mental good health. One of the things that I talked about in a previous life as Minister of Health was the important role of sport in supporting the health service and supporting individuals to ensure that they made the right lifestyle choices. Sport can deal with issues such as obesity, which can lead to diabetes, cardiovascular problems, heart attacks, strokes, suicide and self-harm. All those areas get positive support from sport and from boxing itself. That is the value of boxing.

Ten years ago, when I was Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, we held the World Amateur Boxing Championships in the Odyssey Arena. That was very successful, promoted Northern Ireland worldwide and did a huge amount for the sport at the time. There was huge support from across the boxing community, led by Wayne McCullough, one of the many world champions to have come through the ranks in Northern Ireland.

At that time, the plan was to roll out a strategy. Unfortunately, with the imposition of direct rule, that strategy appears to have fallen by the wayside, and here we are again 10 years later. However, better late than never. We are moving forward with a strategy, and there is money there. That is all to the good, when you look at the facilities in many of the boxing clubs up and down the country. Many work on a shoestring, do not have proper male and female changing facilities and have very poor facilities all round. Jim Allister talked about buckets catching rainwater in Sandy Row. I can confirm that that is the case, but it also happens in other clubs.

Boxing has a poor infrastructure, and the money is to be welcomed. However, we also have to look at Sandy Row Boxing Club. Members will be aware that I represent the area, and I have a close personal knowledge of Sandy Row and the challenges that the people there have faced over the past 10 years. Those challenges have come in the form of repeated instances of discrimination and sectarianism against the club and its members. There is clearly a strong requirement on the Minister, the

Department, Sport Northern Ireland and the boxing authorities to address the issue.

We have heard evidence at the Committee and, as the Chair said, we will hear more evidence. It seems to me that, looking at the issue and the efforts that Sandy Row Boxing Club has made to bring it forward, those responsible have been very slow in finding a remedy. We have the all-Ireland boxing organisation, which appears to be — in fact, it is — a cold house for Protestants boxing out of Sandy Row, and they are not alone. There is a responsibility to address that, and, if that organisation is not prepared to do so, there are other remedies as far as the fraternity is concerned. For example, Sandy Row Boxing Club has been disaffiliated on the grounds that it does not have proper Access Northern Ireland clearance. In fact, it has that clearance and can prove it. Therefore, there are issues there that need to be addressed.

I have absolutely no problem in supporting Mr Allister's amendment. As he said, people in Northern Ireland have the right to box for whomever they wish. If they wish to box for a Northern Ireland association, that is their right. If they wish for that Northern Ireland association to be affiliated with the UK, as is the case in many other sports, that is their right. Just as it is the right of young footballers from a nationalist background to opt to play for the Irish Republic, that right applies to boxers.

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

Mr McGimpsey: Boxers from Northern Ireland have that right, and, unless we see some action from the Minister, it seems inevitable that that step will be taken.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of improved funding for boxing across the community in Northern Ireland and in support of the call for good relations and equality to be the values that govern the sport to ensure that it is open to all people across this region. It is for that reason that I believe that the SDLP amendment best reflects that position. Although I am concerned about the decision to isolate one particular background of people for mention and, indeed, to emphasise a failure to address the issue of sectarianism, given the offers to meet people to try to work this issue through, I am also concerned about aspects of the other proposals today. I will reflect on how the debate proceeds.

Like many other sportsmen and sportswomen from Northern Ireland, our boxers have punched well above their weight, and one can only imagine what they will be able to achieve when they have adequate facilities, support and co-ordination. Venues such as the Ulster Hall, King's Hall and Odyssey Arena have become synonymous with boxing, and sports journalists across the world speak in reverential tones about the atmosphere and the support generated by boxing fans in this region. I hope that the debate, from now on, recognises that boxing, like many other sports, has been a force to bring people together, despite deep division in our community, while affirming that there can be no place for sectarianism of any kind in our community or sports.

Boxers such as Barry McGuigan, Wayne McCullough, Neil Sinclair and Paddy Barnes, to name a few, have lit up the sport and raised amateur and professional titles. These boxers all won medals representing Northern Ireland at the Commonwealth Games, and McCullough and Barnes have won medals representing Ireland at the Olympics. Indeed, McGuigan won the British title as a professional. On those terms, boxing, like other sports, overlaps and confounds the division imposed on this society by many.

The exploits of our Olympians in London this summer were exceptional. I agree with my colleagues who have referenced that. Katie Taylor and Nicola Adams inspired many women to take up the sport, either competitively or as part of a wider fitness regime. Alongside the likes of Carl Frampton and Paul McCloskey, these boxers will, hopefully, continue the rich legacy of boxing in Northern Ireland. So, the Minister's recent announcement of funding is indeed most welcome, and this investment must be used in a fair and imaginative way to include the entire community in the development of this sport. For example, I would welcome investment in my constituency of East Belfast, where there is real need for community facilities and help for boxing clubs, such as Castlereagh Amateur Boxing Club under the leadership of Terry McCorran, based in inner east Belfast. Such clubs reach out to people of all backgrounds, from age six and up, to provide committed coaching and instil values of inclusion, discipline, healthy lifestyle and respect. I know that Michael Copeland MLA has worked hard to support the club and has hosted a match in Parliament Buildings. The club's achievements are all the more impressive, given the battle for resources that it has faced and the voluntary effort that has been required for its development. That is a battle that is not unique to this club, and I thank the

Minister for the consideration that she is giving to visiting the club.

I wholeheartedly support the calls for the Sports Minister, Sport NI and local government to work together to ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support boxing clubs to the benefit of all who seek to participate in the sport. I look forward to seeing that support delivered to give all our recreational and more dedicated boxers the best opportunities possible to develop their talent and enjoy the sport in a safe and shared manner, regardless of their background.

Mr Humphrey: I support our motion and the two amendments to it. I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council.

Northern Ireland, particularly Belfast, has a great tradition of boxing, and, indeed, the city of Belfast has produced nine Olympic medal winners, including two at the recent London Olympics of 2012. I welcome the announcement by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure of more funding for boxing.

As with all sports, boxing should provide a pivotal role across my city and across our country in the life of communities, particularly, as the Chair of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure said, in working-class areas. Today, thousands and, over the years, hundreds of thousands of young people — male and, increasingly, female — have been involved in boxing. Boxing is a sport that provides young people with discipline, confidence, self-management, respect and strategic and technical thinking.

2.15 pm

The Assembly must recognise the important role of boxing clubs in working-class communities. I mentioned Belfast City Council, and other contributors also mentioned Belfast City Council's boxing strategy. It is important that the Assembly and the Department, through Sport NI, works closely and in a collegiate way with Belfast City Council and other councils that bring forward strategies for sport, so that we work in unison to ensure that we have a joined-up approach, removing any possibility of wastage and providing value for money.

In February, Belfast City Council established a steering group to oversee the development of the strategy, and that includes representatives from the council, the Ulster Boxing Council, Sport NI and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association. I commend Belfast City Council for that. Other councils — this is the point that

Mrs McKeivitt made earlier — need to step up to the mark.

I work with two boxing clubs in my constituency. Albert Foundry Boxing Club produced Wayne McCullough, who won a gold medal when competing for Ireland. If there is a boxing club in Northern Ireland that has worse conditions, I do not know where it is. Conditions there are appalling; it does not even have running water. Cairn Lodge Boxing Club is based on the lower Shankill but actually does not have a home. Recently, it moved to a disused primary school, having been for some time in a community centre and having to take the ring up and down three or four times a week. That club was given an opportunity to potentially have a new home, and it still hopes to do so. The Minister knows that, and I have written to her about it in order to raise the issue with her. The issue there was around Sport NI, and I will return to that later in my speech. The club has an interface at either end of Agnes Street. It has 80 young people on its books and a waiting list of 60. It simply cannot meet the demand; facilities do not allow it. Particularly in the summer, it is involved very much in diversionary activity. That club was promised money from the Department and the council, and there was an indication of funding from Sport NI. That money has been taken away. The same thing happened to a sporting facility that was located in the Marrowbone in the Oldpark area of north Belfast. Maybe the Minister will address this in her reply to the debate, but I think that Sport NI needs to be very clear when it is working with groups and clubs, many of them run by volunteers, as other Members have said, where the capacity is not there, that money is delivered on the ground. It should work much more closely with councils in doing so.

Clearly, moneys have been lost and potentially can and will be lost. The funding of elite boxers is obviously key and important. I agree with the point that Mr Allister made. There was a lot of hyperbole earlier in the year when Mr McIlroy decided that he might golf for GB in the next Olympics. We have had the whole situation with James McClean and whether he should play for Northern Ireland or the Republic. If sportsmen are funded by this state, money goes in at youth and junior international level, and the sportsmen progress to full representative vests. Those sportsmen should choose which country they want to box for and not have it forced on them by sporting bodies. Therefore, I think that politics should be taken out of sport.

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

Mr Humphrey: The individual should be left in the position of choosing.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh na gníomhartha dearfacha atá déanta ag an Aire maidir le tacaíocht agus cur chun tosaigh don dornálaíocht ó tháinig sa Roinn.

I welcome the Minister and her very positive actions in supporting and promoting the sport of boxing since coming into office. It is encouraging, too, that Belfast City Council, in conjunction with Sport NI, is developing a boxing strategy at this time and that the Ulster provincial boxing council is producing a development plan. There could be no better time to promote and sell the sport of boxing. We are basking in the wake of an amazingly successful result for Irish boxing at the 2012 Olympics this summer. We eagerly watched as local boxers Paddy Barnes, Michael Conlan and John Joe Nevin stepped into the ring to face their opponents. They made us all so proud when each earned medals for Ireland at this year's Olympics. To top that all off, Katie Taylor from Bray took a gold medal in the women's competition.

Agus ag teacht amach as an bhua sin, tá cuid mhaith dornálaithe nua uailmhianacha óga ó gach páirt den tír seo — ach go háirithe ó cheantracha a bhfuil easpa agus bochtanas iontu — ar féidir leo aisling a bheith acu: go dtiocfadh leo, b'fhéidir, bheith ina ndornálaithe den scoth fosta.

Out of that success, there came many young, aspiring, new boxers in all parts of the country, particularly in areas of poverty and deprivation, who can now dare to dream that they, too, could become champion boxers. There is no better time than the present to build on that success by making the best use of the current strategy on boxing, which will ensure that the identifiable gaps in provision are filled, in keeping with section 75 responsibilities.

I want to see all boxing clubs grow and flourish, so that any young girl or boy from whatever community can become involved in the sport and take advantage of the improved facilities that we can now look forward to. There should be no bar to participation in sport, boxing or otherwise. However, it just happens that boxing is one of the sports that is more accessible than most, perhaps because it does not cost as much to participate in, compared with other sports. Maybe that is why it is more appealing in working-class areas. We all need to encourage that participation and ensure that all

clubs are affiliated to the appropriate sporting bodies and compliant with all the necessary childcare protection regulations.

Is cúis díomá é gur cuireadh ina leith thar na blianta go raibh tarluithe seicteacha ann ag roinnt cluichí dornálaíochta.

It is a matter of disappointment, however, that there have been allegations of incidents of sectarianism at some boxing matches over the years. The Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club has complained about the verbal abuse that its members were subjected to in February 2010, and it was quite right to do so, for such behaviour is unacceptable. It is unfortunate that the police investigation has not resulted in identifying the offenders.

Several Members raised the sectarian issue today, and, indeed, the Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club told the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure that it had endured 10 years of sectarian abuse. I am puzzled about why the issue has not been raised with previous Culture Ministers but is being raised now that we have a Sinn Féin Culture Minister. Sectarianism has no place in sport, and every effort must be made to ensure that anyone engaging in such behaviour is appropriately dealt with under the law. All the relevant bodies, such as the Ulster provincial boxing council, the Irish Amateur Boxing Association and Sport NI have a duty to do all in their power to make the sport a neutral environment where the only fighting that happens takes place in the boxing ring.

A Member of the House has called for the establishment of a separate boxing association for the North of Ireland, but I feel that that would be a mistake. The biggest sport that is organised in that way is soccer, and, as we all know, that sport is notorious for the sectarianism which has — *[Interruption.]* — dogged it over the decades.

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

Ms McCorley: The good news is that Sport NI has been attempting to address the issue over many years in order to make soccer a more friendly sport.

Mar sin de, cad chuige ar mhaith linn gabháil síos an bóthar sin ó thaobh dornálaíochta de?

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

Ms McCorley: Why would we want to go down that route with boxing? Surely, that can only result in the complete sectarianisation of the sport, a retrograde step no matter what way you look at it. Ireland is small country, and it is best served by having just one overall boxing association — *[Interruption.]* — just like the vast majority of other sports in this island. In conclusion —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time, time. We move on to the next Member.

I remind all Members that, if you notice, I will let any Member finish. It is not because they are from my own political party or any other party. I will let other Members speak. Just remember, when others are running out of time, that the same thing applies.

Mr Humphrey: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I have made this point in the House before, and I will make it again as I am pleased and proud to do so. The House should recognise that Northern Ireland football supporters are recognised by Europe as the best supporters in Europe, and they are not sectarian in any way. That is an outrageous statement.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Sammy Brush. Sorry, Sammy Douglas. *[Laughter.]* My apologies, but I am sure that he will not mind.

Mr Douglas: I have been called Sammy Wilson before, so I will not be offended by that.

I support the motion and welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate. First, I thank the Minister for being in attendance. I look forward to hearing her response to today's proceedings, and I hope she comes out fighting.

Like many others, I grew up in a working-class community where boxing, including street boxing or street fighting, was a very important part of growing up. It was an area that had very few facilities for young people. There was a boxing club at the end of my street, and, as a child, I wanted to be the next young Cassius Clay or Henry Cooper. I am giving my age away. Unfortunately, my nose got in the way too often to allow me to fulfil my ambitions.

I am very supportive of the Minister's announcement about her Department's boxing strategy and the much-needed cash injection into the sport. That will be welcomed by all, including the boxing clubs in my constituency,

which were mentioned by Mr Lyttle. Castlereagh boxing club, Eastside Boxing Club and one of the most recently established clubs, a club in the Tullycarnet estate, will certainly welcome that.

For far too long, boxing has been seen and treated as a second-class sport. That neglect has had a detrimental effect on the sport, particularly in the working-class communities where the demand for boxing is greatest. The Assembly has an important role to play in challenging the very real stigma that is associated with the sport, and today's debate provides the perfect opportunity to do that.

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Douglas: Yes.

Mr McCartney: I welcome the fact that the Member has accepted that boxing has been treated as a second-class sport. Perhaps credit should be given to this Minister now that it is going to be made a first-class sport.

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

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for his intervention. I certainly agree with that, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

As has been highlighted by other Members, boxing is a true success story for Northern Ireland. We should celebrate the extraordinary achievements of the two Belfast boxers, Paddy Barnes and Michael Conlon, who won bronze medals in the Olympic Games, and the amazing feat of the Northern Ireland team becoming the most successful boxing team at the Delhi Commonwealth Games. Let us not forget Barry McGuigan, "The Pocket Rocket" — Wayne McCullough — and our own Carl Frampton, a future world champion, I am sure. Last but not least is Katie Taylor. She is a true ambassador for boxing, a great role model for young women and a great role model as someone who has a strong faith. However, our potential within the sport has not yet been fulfilled. The lack of resources and investment is certainly proving to be a major hurdle in the full and proper development of the sport.

Some of the statistics raise genuine concerns. Some 50% of Belfast clubs believe that their current facilities hold back the development of our young people and clubs. Only 10% of the clubs surveyed believe that their toilet and wash facilities are above average, and the majority of clubs in Belfast — in fact two thirds — operate

with a budget of less than £1,000. Once again, we must give praise to Belfast City Council, and I know my colleague William Humphrey mentioned that as well. It took the initiative to develop a strategy with the Minister and other agencies. It is very welcome. That programme will complement all the work being done in tandem by DCAL and Sport Northern Ireland to target the clubs that are most in need.

A few years ago, I compèred boxing matches for the Sandy Row boxing club. One memory etched in my mind is that of a young child of about two playing in the boxing ring during the interval with his great-grandfather, who was in his 80s. That night, I thought that boxing covers the whole ambit of age groups and community relations.

We must ensure that adequate support is given to our boxing clubs. Research by the IABA shows that boxing plays an important role in the life of our hardest-hit communities. I suggest to the Minister that we need to take a proactive approach to ensure that the clubs that need most support get that support. I am a former member of the Belfast European Partnership Board.

When allocating money, we found that quite a number of Protestant areas in Belfast did not have the capacity to put those applications and proposals together. Interestingly enough, research showed that some Catholic areas in Belfast also did not have that capacity. We formulated a plan to ensure that those areas, organisations and groups that were not receiving the support and did not have the capacity, and were so busy with community development in their own areas, had support. It was a bit like the social investment fund. Technical assistance is currently available for those areas to come up with their plans. I certainly encourage the Minister to look at that. It is not only about Belfast but about the whole of Northern Ireland, urban and rural. If anything is to come from today —

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

Mr Douglas: — let it be that we take a proactive approach to addressing those issues.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 15 has been withdrawn.

Child Maintenance

1. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister for Social Development what steps he is taking to support parents who separate and who require help and information to enable them to work together to resolve issues such as maintenance arrangements. (AQO 2811/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): My Department is undertaking a programme of major reform for child maintenance. Compelling research and evidence demonstrate that children who receive support from both parents throughout their childhood tend to enjoy better outcomes in life. Therefore, through the reform programme, I intend to develop a modernised child maintenance service that will provide high-quality information and support at the earliest possible time during a relationship breakdown.

Already, parents in Northern Ireland can be supported in making their own maintenance arrangements through the child maintenance choices service. In January 2011, my Department launched that free, confidential helpline service to help parents to decide the child maintenance arrangement that best suits their needs. That advice and information service has proved to be very effective, with almost 13,000 calls received from April 2011 to the end of September.

I also recognise that family breakdown creates a range of issues that parents need help to overcome. That highlights the importance of an integrated approach across government and voluntary and community services to support families. To that end, my officials have been working with the voluntary and community sector and other Departments to explore the different levels of support required and how support services for separated and separating parents can be better co-ordinated. A key aspect of working with that sector is to develop new services and maintain and strengthen existing signposting services. Officials have been working at community level to trial interventions to assess the different levels of support required in local communities in order

to find out what works and does not work at a local level in supporting separated families. The findings from that work have highlighted potential opportunities for enhancing existing arrangements to support the most vulnerable through local community organisations and trusted networks.

Finally, the Executive are determined to work effectively across local government —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McCausland: — and the delivering social change framework aims to deliver a sustained reduction in poverty.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his detailed response. Will he assure us that, in facilitating those arrangements, no charge will be levied to the caring parent? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McCausland: The issue of charges attracts considerable attention. In Great Britain, charges for the use of the new statutory child maintenance scheme will be introduced. However, in Northern Ireland, maintenance is a devolved matter. Charges are still under consideration.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Minister, why, at this point, is there a need for reform of the child maintenance system?

Mr McCausland: The current child maintenance system places too much emphasis on the state determining financial support and not enough on supporting separated and separating families to reach their own arrangements. The system takes responsibility away from parents and can lead to hostility. The child maintenance reform programme puts collaboration between parents in the interests of their children first and places greater emphasis on supporting parents to make their own arrangements. Research shows that children who receive support from both parents throughout their childhood tend to enjoy better outcomes in later life. Therefore, I want to support families and ensure the best outcomes for children. That is why I want better co-ordinated support services for separated and separating families in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. What support does the Minister's Department provide to families in which the parent without care resides in another jurisdiction?

Mr McCausland: The Member makes a point about one parent living outside Northern Ireland. That issue has arisen on a number of occasions, and I have had correspondence from various MLAs about that. In the arrangements between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, for example, it is important that we have the best possible systems in place to make sure that information and then payment are forthcoming. The Member will understand that there can be difficulties with that, but we take it very seriously and continue to work on it.

Home Heating Oil: Pay-as-you-go Scheme

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the outcome of the evaluation of the home heating oil pay-as-you-go pilot scheme. (AQO 2812/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Officials from my Department have been working with Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services to test a pay-as-you-go oil scheme. This exciting new technology has the potential to offer householders the opportunity to pay for oil as they use it, similar to the way in which people pay for their electricity or gas. I have taken a personal interest in this issue. When I came into the Department, I identified it as a priority, along with other aspects of addressing fuel poverty. I have pushed forward the development of this product, as I believe that it will greatly benefit people in fuel poverty. It also provides a good example of government working with local companies to drive the local economy.

The technology was piloted for three months and evaluated by Carillion Energy Services and the Housing Executive. Both evaluations were extremely positive. The majority of householders who took part in the pilot scheme said that they would recommend the technology to other householders.

I am very keen for the technology to be rolled out, and my officials have been having ongoing discussions with Kingspan Renewables and Carillion Energy Services on the development of the product, which could be rolled out in future energy efficiency schemes. I have asked officials to progress this important initiative as quickly as possible. I am disappointed that it is taking so long to get this up and running, but there are important issues to be resolved in ensuring that we address issues with the cost of the product itself and the running costs associated with it.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his update and credit him for the pilot of the scheme. It is good to see the private sector working in partnership with the Department to deliver assistance with home heating budgeting, and many people in my constituency have welcomed it. However, given that we are now in the depths of winter, can the Minister give a firm timescale for when the scheme will be mainstreamed?

Mr McCausland: I welcome the fact that the Member gave credit for the scheme. In the past few days, Members giving credit to my Department for an achievement seems to be breaking out as a habit in the Assembly, and I welcome that.

As I said, I am disappointed that it has taken so long. I cannot give a timescale at present. It would be wrong to do that because of the two important issues of the cost of the product and its running costs. We need to get this right because it is such an important issue for people in light of the cost of fuel and the fuel poverty that can arise as a result of that. We are pressing on with the utmost urgency. I am disappointed that we have not quite got there yet, but I continue to make it a priority. I am sure that the Member will join me in hoping that we get there as quickly as possible.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister detail whether his pilot addressed some or all of the concerns about ownership and liability in the event of theft of oil from tanks?

Mr McCausland: The pilot scheme looked at that issue. The details of what would make it a good, successful scheme are still being worked through. The technology works, but it is a matter of getting the other pieces of the jigsaw in place, particularly those that I have already identified.

Mrs Hale: Will the Minister provide the House with an update on the boiler replacement scheme?

Mr McCausland: That is another important initiative for tackling fuel poverty. In June 2012, I launched the new boiler replacement scheme. It followed on from the pilot scheme, which ended in March of this year.

The new scheme offers a grant of up to £1,000 towards the cost of replacing old, inefficient boilers if the family has an income of less than £40,000. Twelve million pounds have been allocated to the scheme over the next three years, with £4 million available for grants before

the end of March 2013. Householders with an income of up to £20,000 could be eligible for a maximum grant of £1,000. Householders who earn between £20,000 and £40,000 could be eligible for a maximum grant of up to £500. The level of grant will depend on whether householders replace oil with oil or gas and whether controls are also installed. Householders can choose an installer of their choice, as long as they are appropriately qualified.

The scheme has been very popular. Some 19,500 enquiries have been received already in less than two months. I have instructed the Housing Executive to allocate additional resources to deal with the huge number of inquiries that are coming in. To date, 10,500 application forms have been issued, and, of those, 4,500 have been returned. Compared with the anticipated 5,500 cases that we thought we would receive each year, those numbers are very large.

DSD: Staff Reductions

3. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Social Development whether, in the remainder of this mandate, there will be a reduction in staff in the Social Security Agency, the Housing Executive or his Department. (AQO 2813/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I do not expect reductions in staff numbers in the remainder of this mandate. However, as part of the changes arising from the devolution of justice, a number of staff will transfer from the Department for Social Development to the Department of Justice.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister assure the House that Social Security Agency staff will have the necessary resources to enable them to cope with the advent of welfare reform?

Mr McCausland: The implementation of welfare reform will certainly bring changes. The Member referred to the "resources" that staff need to cope, but I am not entirely clear what she means by that. With regard to having the skills and training to maybe move to a different model or, in some cases, to relocate to a different area in the sector, I assure her that everything will be done to ensure that people have the necessary training and that the changeover is swift and efficient.

If she is asking whether the implementation will result in staff reductions, I can tell her that, during this mandate, there will be no reduction in staff due to the welfare reform agenda. It will ensure that services are delivered as efficiently as possible. Although ultimate numbers are not yet determined, the expectation in the medium term is that, compared with the number that is needed for the current system, fewer staff will be required to administer the new welfare reform system. Changes will be implemented in a carefully planned way, and new arrangements will be introduced gradually through a phased approach. The administration of existing benefits will continue for some time, during which staff will be needed to operate both the current and the new system. Any reductions in staffing will be beyond the current mandate.

Mr Beggs: In working with a tight budget, difficult choices have to be made. One has to ask whether we should invest in staff or in capital for new homes or programmes. Can the Minister advise the House how the quality of service will be monitored as the number of clients and staff members change in the new systems that come forward?

Mr McCausland: The Member will be aware that systems are in place on an ongoing basis to monitor the service that is being delivered. In my answer to the previous question, I pointed out that work will be taken forward on a phased basis and that adequate provision will be made to ensure that the changeover is smooth and maintains the high standard that the public are entitled to expect.

Mrs McKeivitt: Is it now the Minister's opinion that the business case that referred to the loss of 1,630 jobs for staff in Northern Ireland under universal credit is wrong?

Mr McCausland: The Member is clearly confused. What I said, first of all, concerned what would happen if we did not move forward with universal credit. I noticed that, at the weekend, some members of her party, who are still at the Neanderthal stage, were obviously still intent on saying, "Vote this down. Do nothing about it. Block it." That was the message that came from her party colleagues at the weekend: "Block it." That is — I choose my words carefully — an example of financial illiteracy. It is an utter impossibility, as we have spelt out very clearly the implications of doing that.

2.45 pm

That is why it is good that we have proceeded on the path that we have taken. I believe that we are getting it absolutely right as regards welfare reform. If we had gone down the road that was being advocated by some people across the way — indeed, it was still being advocated at the weekend — we would be in a position in which we would have lost potentially 1,600 jobs from Northern Ireland. If the Members over there in the SDLP actually listened more than they interrupted, they might learn something. The potential loss of jobs is a real threat if we go down the road that the Member's party is advocating.

As regards the other matter, the figures are correct. When you move from a range of benefits to a single benefit, obviously, in the longer term, there will come a point at which fewer people are needed. That is the fact. Again, the Member seems to prefer to talk to the person beside her rather than listen. That probably explains why there is the inability to understand the two facts.

There are two separate figures and two separate issues. They happen to be the same number, but they are two separate issues.

Neighbourhood Renewal: Inner East Belfast

4. **Mr Douglas** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the potential regeneration projects his Department is considering in the inner east Belfast neighbourhood renewal area. (AQO 2814/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is currently committed to a number of significant regeneration projects in the inner east Belfast neighbourhood renewal area. It is providing £5.4 million towards the Skainos development on the Newtownards Road, over £2 million towards the Templemore Avenue School redevelopment and £3.2 million as part of the funding package for Connswater Community Greenway. My officials are also engaged locally with a range of stakeholders in taking forward a number of potential projects, including new community centres for the Ballymacarrett and Walkway communities, as well as the Titanic People tourism-related project. All those projects will help to address local priorities identified in the inner east Belfast neighbourhood renewal action plan.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive reply. Will the Minister comment on the status of the potential for a

new community centre — that is, the Ballymacarrett Friendship Centre — on the lower Newtownards Road?

Mr McCausland: An economic appraisal is being updated to assess the need for a new community centre to be built there. There will be the potential for funding of £200,000 to be sought from my Department through neighbourhood renewal towards that newbuild.

I am sure that the Member will be pleased if I list some other projects that we are taking forward in east Belfast. My Department recently concluded a number of major environmental improvement schemes on the Newtownards Road, Castlereagh Street, Albertbridge Road, Short Strand and Woodstock Road, at a level of investment in excess of £3 million. Further similar schemes are being considered for Ravenhill gateway, Templemore/Albertbridge, Woodstock Link, Bridgend, Lower Newtownards Road, Short Strand and Mountpottinger, which will require a commitment in the coming years in excess of £7 million. The Executive's commitment under Delivering Social Change includes the creation of social enterprise incubation hubs, and the Newtownards Road is well placed to be such a hub for east Belfast. I am sure that the Member will be pleased by that news.

Mr Lyttle: I am sorry to interrupt that DUP exchange.

What work is the Minister doing in his Department to ensure that areas of need outwith the neighbourhood renewal areas — for example, Knocknagoney — will also benefit from investment?

Mr McCausland: As a Department, we invest in many different areas across Northern Ireland. Some of our investment is at a regional level, and, therefore, benefits are accrued to communities right across the Province. However, our focus is very much on areas of the maximum disadvantage — the neighbourhood renewal areas. For areas that fall outside that, we have our areas at risk programme. It is two years' support to give some communities that fall just outside the neighbourhood renewal threshold that little bit of extra help to lift them up.

I am happy to speak to the Member about any other areas and whether there are other opportunities, should he wish to contact me about that.

Welfare Reform

5. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister for Social Development, following his statement on 22 October 2012, to outline any other areas of flexibility on welfare reform that he is exploring with Lord Freud. (AQO 2815/11-15)

Mr McCausland: I appreciate the Member's interest in the area; however, I do not believe that this is the place to go through the finer details of my negotiations with Lord Freud. As the Member is aware, the Welfare Reform Bill is currently going through its Committee Stage in the Assembly. I have been listening with interest to the views of MLAs, the groups that have responded to the Social Development Committee's call for evidence, and stakeholders who have been attending events held by my Department to hear views on welfare reform. I remain committed to hearing ideas on how we can mitigate the negative aspects of welfare reform without breaching parity.

In my statement to the Assembly on 22 October, I mentioned that Lord Freud has a genuine interest in the specific challenges we face here in Northern Ireland. He has accepted my invitation to visit us in November to discuss how best we can address the impact of the housing benefit changes. He is aware of some of the issues particular to Northern Ireland and is particularly interested in our discussions on how the housing sector can contribute to finding solutions.

The Executive subcommittee on welfare reform also continues to meet and discuss issues of concern and potential areas of flexibilities. I have reflected those discussions in my detailed negotiations with the team of Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). I and officials from my Department continue to be involved in all aspects of the welfare reform programme with counterparts in DWP.

I am working towards achieving a welfare system for Northern Ireland that addresses our issues, based on the principles of protecting the vulnerable, helping people into employment, developing a system that is fair, and encouraging personal and social responsibility.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his full response. Given the influence that might be exerted during the visit referred to, is the Minister concerned that, because of a range of delays, the Committee considering this matter aims to conclude its work on, I believe, the very first day of Lord Freud's visit? Is that a missed opportunity?

Mr McCausland: No, I do not think that it is a matter of real concern. I am content that he is making his visit to engage with people and listen to their views.

However, it has to be borne in mind that this is a devolved matter. So, the conversations that, obviously, must take place are between the Committee and stakeholders but primarily between the Committee and me as Minister. We should not get hung up on this idea of running off to Westminster, or seeking to short-circuit things in some way, or thinking that there is an easy answer by talking directly to Lord Freud. The key thing is that this is a devolved matter. It is a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly within the constraints that we are all very much aware of. I will, therefore, want to give serious consideration to whatever comes forward from the Committee.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister rightly referred to the fact that the Committee is considering the legislation as we speak. I was, therefore, quite astounded when I heard him speaking to the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations on Friday morning. I understand — and I stand to be corrected on this one and, hopefully, I will be — that the Minister made a statement on Friday morning that, as I read it, he will consider no change to what has been described as the bedroom tax or, more appropriately, the owner-occupancy rules.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question.

Mr Maskey: Was it not, at the very least, premature for such a statement to be made, given that the Minister is still to meet David Freud, and in the context of the Committee's consideration?

Mr McCausland: The comment to which, I think, the Member refers is one that arose in the course of an interview, not in the actual address to the conference, which covered a whole range of issues relating to housing, such as the housing strategy, the Housing Executive, and so on.

I am very conscious of the issue, because it will impact on more than 30,000 social tenants in Northern Ireland. It is how we do something about that to make sure we get the best outcome. There is no surprise there. Landlords here have always known to expect the same changes at the same time as those in the rest of the UK. Delaying this change will

directly cost the Northern Ireland Executive up to £9 million.

I believe that we can address the issues and meet the need without delaying the introduction. We can mitigate the effect in a range of ways, by making sure that we get the right allocations, that tenants understand the change and that, in future, there is more smaller-sized accommodation, which has been a shortcoming in the past. We need the right support measures. I certainly have said already, and did say in answer to the question — although I do not know whether it was broadcast or not because they sometimes broadcast the bit that they want — how we would mitigate the issue. I also intend to increase the funding available for discretionary housing payments and change the legislation to allow such payments to be made to all social housing tenants.

I will be happy to discuss with the Committee a range of measures that we will bring forward that make sure we can address this and mitigate the difficulty without the burden of a further £9 million on the Executive.

Mr P Ramsey: Further to his responses, will the Minister agree that there is continuing worry, stress and distress for so many in Northern Ireland and for so many within the all-party groups that we represent here? Will the Minister outline for the House his assessment of the impact on vulnerable adults and children across Northern Ireland if he does not secure any more flexibility in his discussions with Mr Freud?

Mr McCausland: Unlike the Member, I am not a defeatist. We go into these discussions and go forward in a way in which we anticipate and identify what we need, and then we go out and negotiate it. I believe there are flexibilities still to be got, so I do not see that as the end of the road. What we have got is part of the way. We have had considerable success already, and the Member's party has recognised that on occasion. The other point is to make sure that we do that again and get further flexibilities.

Child Maintenance: Computer Access

6. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister for Social Development what arrangements will be put in place for parents who wish to make an online application for child maintenance support who do not have access to a computer or have limited computer and literacy skills. (AQO 2816/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Although there is a facility for parents to make online applications for child maintenance, the main focus of support is through the Child Maintenance Choices freephone information line. Where a parent does not have access to a computer or has difficulty completing an application, they may contact our helpline staff. Callers to this free service are provided with impartial information and guidance on all aspects of child maintenance to help them to put in place an effective maintenance arrangement best suited to their circumstances.

Where parents decide to make an application for child maintenance to the statutory child maintenance service, staff will support them to make their application over the telephone or, if the parent prefers, they may make a written application by completing the appropriate application form.

Mr McAleer: Is any provision being made for one-to-one consultations with staff? I am thinking particularly of rural areas where families do not have access to broadband provision.

Mr McCausland: The point I made there was that people can, as at present, make their application by telephone. The fact is that in Northern Ireland today, as in most other western countries, the telephone coverage is extensive. People are walking around with one mobile phone or a couple of mobile phones as well as a telephone in the house. There is easy access there to a telephone. In addition to online applications, parents have the option to apply by telephone to the statutory child maintenance service provided by the child maintenance and enforcement division. If they do not have a telephone, postal applications are also accepted.

Ms Brown: What arrangements will be put in place for online applications for people in Northern Ireland claiming benefits following welfare reform?

Mr McCausland: One initiative I have instructed officials to put in place is a pilot programme that will support those who do not have access to a computer or have limited literacy skills. The development of that programme is at a very early stage. However, it is envisaged that it will run in local communities using IT facilities in community centres or libraries and will be delivered by qualified instructors.

During the transition to online applications, Northern Ireland customers will retain the ability to make a claim via the telephone. I am keen that that remains an option for our customers and is yet another key operational flexibility that I have secured for the people of Northern Ireland. That is another example for Members in the SDLP and elsewhere who are keen on maximum flexibilities.

We have achieved a lot of flexibilities already. We have been very successful; my approach has proved to be right. That is another flexibility that we have secured for the people of Northern Ireland.

3.00 pm

Justice

Thompson House, Belfast

1. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister of Justice whether he will review the decision to locate sex offenders in the refurbished Thompson House, Belfast. (AQO 2826/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): I fully support the position of the relevant agencies: it is in the best interests of the public for Thompson House to continue to operate as approved premises for offenders supervised by the Probation Board, on the basis of what is best for individual risk-management purposes. Effective public protection is the key factor. The Presbyterian Board of Social Witness has operated the facility for some 30 years and contributed much to the provision of effective public protection from the risk posed by a variety of offenders, including sex offenders. I have listened to the community representatives and their concerns, as have the agencies. However, experience has shown that Thompson House is a vital facility. Having considered and taken account of the statutory and operational responsibilities of the relevant agencies in ensuring the highest standards of public protection for all, I support the continuing use of the facility to accommodate sex offenders.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his response. Is he aware of widespread concern in the community in relation to his decision to house ex-sex offenders in Thompson House, given the fact that well over 2,000 schoolchildren use the Antrim Road at that point to go to and from school throughout the day? Does the Minister accept that he should reflect on that and review the decision with a

view to at least creating a moratorium on the reintroduction of ex-sex offenders so that the community could at least have an opportunity to see how the situation might develop in the near future?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Maginness for that point. He refers to my decision, but it is not my decision. Thompson House has accommodated offenders for 30 years, many of whom have been sex offenders. During that time, there has been no incident involving any child in the immediate area of Thompson House by a resident of Thompson House. The practical reality is that the best public protection that can be provided is by accommodating offenders who require supervision, including sex offenders, in appropriate accommodation with the level of supervision that exists in Thompson House, supporting the work that is being done by probation and others with their clients externally. That is the best way of protecting the people of north Belfast and every other area; not somehow suggesting that we can solve the problem by moving them to a different area. The reality is that the record of all the hostels that accommodate offenders is an exceptionally good one in terms of the supervision and the public protection that they provide.

Mr Humphrey: I declare an interest as a member of the Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Board of Social Witness at Corkey House. Has the Minister had any meetings with the Presbyterian Church or the Board of Social Witness around this issue?

Mr Ford: I do not think that I have to declare an interest as a former member of the Board of Social Witness. I have had meetings with Mr Lindsay Conway and others from the Board of Social Witness. I have had meetings with those who are involved with public protection arrangements generally. I have attended a meeting with some representatives of the local community and elected representatives from North Belfast. At every one of them, the same issues have been discussed. It is fundamentally about how, in difficult circumstances, we provide the best possible protection for the people of Northern Ireland. Nothing can be perfect, but the arrangements in Thompson House are as good as we are going to get, given that they cannot be 100% perfect.

Mr Copeland: Will the Minister detail whether there have been any further incidents or threats to those premises since the pipe bomb was discovered in October 2011?

Mr Ford: I am not aware of any specific threats of the scale of the pipe bomb that happened, but, undoubtedly, there has been a certain amount of low-level reference. There has been a certain amount of graffiti around the premises, but I cannot give Mr Copeland any more specific detail, other than to say that I do not believe that there have been incidents of the level of the pipe bomb since then.

Maghaberry Prison

2. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the contribution that the staff and facilities at HMP Maghaberry make to the delivery of prison services. (AQO 2827/11-15)

Mr Ford: I visited Maghaberry prison on 1 November following the brutal murder of prison officer David Black. I want to pay tribute to the professionalism and dedication of the staff at Maghaberry, who continue to do a difficult job in a challenging environment despite their shock, anger and sadness at the senseless murder of a valued colleague. I have made it clear several times that we should not underestimate the vital role that prison officers play in society in working with offenders to address offending behaviour, to rehabilitate and to reduce the risk of reoffending. In so doing, they enhance public safety across Northern Ireland. That is a role that we are continuing to develop and build on through the prison reform programme.

Members will be aware that the Criminal Justice Inspection conducted an announced inspection of Maghaberry prison in March 2012. Although the final report has not yet been published, initial feedback has been encouraging in that it recognised Maghaberry as an improving establishment. I welcome the inspectorate's findings, which are indicative of the effort that has been made across the Prison Service and by Maghaberry staff and management to address the areas of concern that had been previously identified. However, I accept that much more needs to be done across a range of issues to address overcrowding; to safeguard equality of outcomes for prisoners; to develop the learning and skills curriculum, capacity and attendance; and to further improve the regime and facilities at Maghaberry. I am confident that, in the context of a reforming service, staff and management will continue to work with professionalism and dedication to address those outstanding areas of concern.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his answer. I appreciate that, in answering it, a lot of the emphasis was on what the prisoners get out of the establishment. Unfortunately, staff are not

duly considered, even down to the food they get at lunchtime. If they want hot food, they cannot get it inside the facility and have to go out, putting themselves at risk and everything else. Prisoners can get hot meals, but, in the current staff facilities, staff who work in the prison cannot.

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Girvan for that point. The specific issue of the provision of canteen facilities in prisons is being re-examined. We all appreciate the context in which that is being done.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister detail whether there have been any reviews of security for prison officers within and outside the prison complexes in recent weeks?

Mr Ford: I can assure Mr Elliott that there has been a significant review of security measures for individual prison officers in the context of their home security, the issue of personal protection weapons, which Members will remember has been raised, and their security going into and out of establishments. I do not think that the House would expect me to go into the detail of that, but I believe that very significant work has been done. I have had meetings with the Chief Constable and others, and, later this week, I will meet the Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office who has responsibility for the home protection scheme. A number of issues are being actively addressed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the need for supplementary questions to be relevant to the original question.

Mr Dickson: I thank prison officers for their commitment to their work in Northern Ireland, and I note that the Minister has told the House that the prison is an improving establishment.

Minister, new prison officers have recently been recruited and are now taking up their roles in the prisons. What will your Department be doing to support them in their ongoing training?

Mr Ford: I suspect that there are two parts to that question. The first is security for individual members of staff, which we have just been talking about. In their training, new members of staff are given security advice, and they are able to obtain the equipment that is obtainable by all staff on the same basis. They are also given very significant training to ensure that they are fit, in general terms, for the role they are being asked to perform. I think that three of the first eight classes of 20 prison officers have

passed out from the college in Millisle, but they will each have three further 8-week periods in each of the three establishments to train them for the work they will do. Work to upskill existing staff is ongoing.

Of course, the new staff will be expected to show that they are capable of carrying out the work of custody officer to a certain level within their first year in post. They will then be given the opportunity for further training and development opportunities to move into other roles in the Prison Service. I believe that, unlike what may have happened in the past, we have a process now that enables all Prison Service staff to gain additional skills so that they can be better equipped for the job ahead of them.

Knife Crime: Craigavon

3. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to introduce a knife amnesty in the Craigavon area, given the increase in knife crime in recent years. (AQO 2828/11-15)

Mr Ford: PSNI statistics on violent and sexual offences involving knives and sharp instruments indicate a decline in such offences from 2007 across Northern Ireland, with a marginal increase of 2% during 2011-12 compared with the previous year. However, there have been increases in such incidents in some districts. I understand that there have been fluctuations in the number of offences in Craigavon during the past five years and that figures for the Craigavon area for 2011-12 indicate an increase of 11 offences compared with 2010-11.

As knives are in everyday use and readily available in every household, it is important to raise awareness that they are dangerous and to encourage responsible usage to prevent these unwanted and unacceptable attacks from taking place. At a local level, policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs) have a responsibility to work with the community to identify and address issues of local concern, and I am pleased that the proposed action plan from Craigavon PCSP has an action focused on knife crime. I also understand that the PSNI delivers awareness sessions on knife crime to post-primary schools and young people as part of the youth conference arrangements in the Youth Justice Agency.

Given the current statistics, I do not think that a knife crime amnesty across Northern Ireland would be appropriate at this time. I assure the Member, however, that the possibility of a

further knife crime amnesty will remain under consideration and that I remain ready to consider any additional measures that would be effective in reducing knife crime.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. The previous two knife amnesties led to 1,488 knives being handed in Province-wide, 69 of them in Craigavon. Does the Minister not accept that this low-cost initiative, although not a panacea, is a useful measure among others to help to tackle this serious problem in our society?

Mr Ford: I appreciate the point that Mr Moutray is trying to make about how things are operating and how they worked from that previous amnesty. As he correctly highlighted, nearly 1,500 knives were handed in during the two amnesties of 2006. However, the total cost of those was £300,000 in Northern Ireland. So, although he describes amnesties as "low-cost", I am not sure that that is a particularly effective use of money in straitened times. I am open to any specific arrangements that would be seen to make a real difference. The reality is that we did not see that amnesty paying any dividends as opposed to a general trend in the use of knives in crimes.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister expand on the problem in the Craigavon area, and can he identify any relationship or cause for the upward trend?

Mr Ford: The simple answer is no. It is not possible, at this stage, to give answers to Mrs Dobson's questions. I said in my initial answer that numbers, which are low, fluctuate a bit from year to year, and it is difficult to see a trend in those fluctuations. What is clear is that there is a general downward trend across Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr McDevitt: It seems a bit strange that the Minister does not consider it value for money to spend £300,000 on taking knives off our streets. Therefore, does he have plans to legislate to control further the sale and availability of knives in this region?

Mr Ford: The issue of knife sales has, of course, been dealt with in legislation that increased the minimum age at which someone could buy a knife from 16 to 18. The knife crime that we talk about frequently involves the inappropriate use of knives that are perfectly acceptable in a domestic context, so we have to be realistic about how possible it is to control their purchase. The issue is to ensure the control of knives in a wider sense.

Prisons: Full-body Scanners

4. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Justice whether his Department has submitted an application to the relevant authorities to use the X-ray transmission scanner as part of the full-body scanning pilot scheme. (AQO 2829/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have made clear previously, the use of transmission X-ray equipment has not yet been approved for use in UK prisons. Consequently, authorisation must be obtained under the Justification of Practices Involving Ionising Radiation Regulations 2004. A draft justification application is now under consideration by Prison Service management and should be ready for submission later this month, subject to further clarification on legislative issues, including the non-medical use of that equipment.

3.15 pm

The justifying authority is required to consult the relevant Northern Ireland agencies, including the Health and Safety Executive, the Food Standards Agency and the Health Protection Agency, as well as the other UK jurisdictions. The Department of Justice will act as the justifying authority, as required under the regulations.

Mr P Ramsey: I am disappointed to hear that the Department has not made a formal application for authority to use these scanners. Given that the Department is now preparing an application for approval, can the Minister give the House an indication of the authorities' time frame for the application's assessment? What is his assessment of the body scanners?

Mr Ford: Unfortunately, I cannot give any assessment to Mr Ramsey at present. As I have made clear to the House before, when it comes to the transmission of X-ray matter and, indeed, millimetre wave scanners, the Northern Ireland Prison Service is at the forefront of policy in these islands in seeking alternatives to full-body searching. It is not possible, given that we are leading the way, to give an assessment of the time that will be required.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister not have a responsibility to drive forward the time frame for this process, rather than leaving it up to those submitting the application?

Mr Ford: Yes, I do have a responsibility, and that is what I am carrying through.

Mr Swann: Is the Minister aware of any objections to the use of full-body scanning in the current pilot schemes at Magilligan or Hydebank?

Mr Ford: Some prisoners have raised issues with the searching. That is what the pilot schemes are about — ensuring that we get things like the tabulation of the machinery correct and that prisoners do not have to spend extra time if they have to go through that search. However, I believe that we are seeing positive results from the two millimetre wave scanners. Of course, that is different from the technical issue of the transmission X-rays, which the question was about.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Criminal Justice: Guilty Pleas

6. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the proposals on early guilty pleas within the proposed "Faster, Fairer Justice Bill". (AQO 2831/11-15)

Mr Ford: Late guilty pleas not only delay justice but have a negative effect on victims and witnesses. There are real benefits to encouraging persons guilty of an offence to admit their guilt at an early stage. Entering an early guilty plea avoids the need for a trial and saves victims and witnesses from having to give evidence. Between January and May, my Department consulted on options to encourage earlier guilty pleas, and it presented its proposals to the Justice Committee before the summer recess. The provisions that I intend to include in the Bill represent the outcome of that process.

The Bill will propose placing a duty on a defence representative to make clients guilty of an offence aware of the benefits of admitting their guilt at an earlier stage. It will also enhance the current statutory arrangements by requiring a court, when sentencing, to specify the level of credit that would have applied had a guilty plea been entered. The Bill will propose a change to the law to allow the direct transfer of a defendant from a Magistrates' Court to the Crown Court for sentencing when the defendant has indicated an intention to plead guilty. These provisions will support the broader inter-agency work being co-ordinated by my Department through the speeding up justice programme.

Mr Kinahan: I wonder whether the Minister is concerned that these proposals could

pressurise non-guilty individuals into accepting a guilty plea to ensure a lenient sentence.

Mr Ford: I am aware of those concerns being raised, but I cannot see why anyone who is not guilty, and who can put a case to the court that they are not guilty, would see any benefit in pleading guilty.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline the timeline on which he seeks to introduce the Bill to the House and give an assurance that access to justice will not be restricted by cost savings?

Mr Ford: I obtained Executive approval for drafting the Bill early last month. I am optimistic that it will be possible to introduce the Bill in the early part of next year, but we all know that drafting can take a little longer than hoped. I give Mr Boylan the assurance that he seeks that I will do my best to ensure that we do not create any difficulties in ensuring proper access to justice, but we all know the difficult financial circumstances in which we live. I am certainly satisfied that what has been done so far on, for example, criminal legal aid costs, has ensured that we have made the necessary savings, not by taking people out of the scope of legal aid but by reducing the amounts paid to individual solicitors and barristers.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Basil McCrea is not in his place. I call Mr Adrian McQuillan.

Magilligan Prison

8. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Justice for his Department's assessment of the importance of Magilligan prison to the economy in the East Londonderry constituency. (AQO 2833/11-15)

Mr Ford: At the outset, as I have done in a series of recent engagements with elected representatives and other stakeholders, I stress that no final decision has been taken on the future of Magilligan prison.

I recognise that, in coming to a decision on the future of Magilligan, we cannot ignore the impact that its closure would have on the local economy. At this stage, the economic impact of either having a prison there or moving it elsewhere has not been quantified. That is why I have made it clear that any decision to proceed with decommissioning Magilligan

would be the subject of a full economic appraisal.

However, Magilligan prison's future cannot be based on one issue alone. Ultimately, my decision must be determined by what is best for the community in Northern Ireland where rehabilitating offenders, reducing offending and protecting the public are concerned. That is why I must take into account issues such as family links, and rehabilitation and employment opportunities for offenders. With that in mind, my officials are continuing to engage with stakeholders on how some prisoners' needs might best be served by locating a prison in the north-west and, if that is the case, whether there is scope to build on and improve rehabilitation opportunities for prisoners there.

If I am convinced that locating a prison in the north-west is indeed best for Northern Ireland where rehabilitating offenders, reducing offending and protecting the public are concerned, that will be reflected in my final decision on the future of Magilligan prison.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer. Does he agree that no decision on Magilligan prison should be made without considering the effect that it will have on the local economy?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree with Mr McQuillan on that general point. Indeed, I made that point clear at the public meeting in Limavady a few weeks ago and, more recently, when I met a number of council representatives from Ballymoney, Coleraine and Limavady, including the Member's colleague Mr George Robinson, who is sitting beside him.

It is clearly an issue that has to be taken into consideration, but it is not the only issue. Although I can understand the view that local representatives are taking of the importance of the prison as an employer and for the economy of Limavady and the north-west in general, that is not the only issue on which I can determine something that is my responsibility.

As we look at the issue, and given that no decision has been taken, I want to see whether there are options that would change what was originally recommended in the estate strategy and in where I have asked Prison Service staff to re-examine the potential options. I am certainly heartened by some of the positive commitments to engagement that I received from public representatives and businesspeople in that most recent meeting that I had with them.

The issue is still very much under consultation, and, were a decision to close Magilligan to be made, there would be a full economic appraisal of it.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister says that no economic appraisal has yet been carried out of the closure of Magilligan prison. Does he have any idea how much it will cost to keep the prison open between now and 2018?

Mr Ford: With due respect, Mr Ó hOisín seems to presume that there is going to be a decision to close the prison. As I made clear today and on numerous other occasions, the issue is out for consultation. Part of that consultation involves looking at what possible use there might be of Magilligan prison, as well as at the prison review team's original recommendations, which included looking at centralising on a site that is nearer to where a larger proportion of the population of Northern Ireland live. Clearly, the issue has to be that we ensure that we meet the needs of prisoners from all over Northern Ireland and that we get the best possible rehabilitation functions for them.

I have no detailed figures today on the cost of maintaining the prison until 2018 even if it were to be decommissioned at that point. A figure of a few million pounds has been highlighted for work that would be necessary to deal with changes to some facilities and improvements to some security measures at the prison. That work will be required if the prison were kept open for either only a few years or a longer period.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister understand that the economic disadvantage would not just be to East Londonderry but to north Antrim, where many prison officers who work in Magilligan live? Will the fact that several million pounds is currently being spent on the provision of a new sewerage facility to accommodate a new and large prison be taken into account in the economic appraisal of the wise expenditure of public money and any suggestion that the prison should not stay where it is?

Mr Ford: I am happy to say that my departmental responsibilities do not include those of Northern Ireland Water. I happily cede those to my colleague the Minister for Regional Development.

There are issues that affect a number of factors relating to the economy. I have no doubt that other examples could equally have been produced relating to other aspects of the

physical infrastructure in the Limavady and Magilligan area. However, if we are talking about an investment of a very substantial sum to provide prison facilities for the benefit of Northern Ireland, frankly, we have to look a bit wider than the cost of sewerage works at Magilligan. That is part of it and will feed into any economic appraisal, but it is a long way short of being the only key issue to be addressed.

That is why I made it clear when I talked to the representatives of the three councils a few weeks ago that we also need to look at a range of issues, including the potential for stakeholder involvement and the potential to build on the existing good but limited rehabilitation facilities that are available for those in, for example, the Foyleview unit to go out from Magilligan daily for work experience. That is the kind of work that needs to be done in the Prison Service. That is the kind of work that I am focused on. Although the infrastructure will also be borne in mind, for me, the fundamental issue is ensuring that we have a Prison Service that is fit for purpose and that does its best to rehabilitate all those who are in need of the kinds of services that are provided by the Prison Service to protect the public as a whole.

PSNI: Agency, Consultancy and Associate Staff

9. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Justice when his Department first entered into discussions with the PSNI on the development of an outline business case for the tendering of a new contract for temporary agency, consultancy or associate staff. (AQO 2834/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI is responsible for developing business cases, whereas my Department's role is to approve those that fall outside the Police Service's delegated financial limits.

The Police Service first shared a draft of the business case with my Department in late July. In the knowledge that there was a live Northern Ireland Audit Office investigation into the Police Service's use of agency staff, my officials advised the PSNI that it would be inappropriate to review the business case until after the report had been published and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) hearing had taken place. The PSNI has not submitted an updated draft since the PAC hearing. It is important that any recommendations made by the PAC be considered and, if appropriate, included in any new contract.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he assure us that any new contracts will ensure full compliance with equality requirements?

Mr Ford: Mr Brady asks specifically what I can do to ensure compliance of particular contracts. My role in the Department is to do with the formal approval of a business case. It is the responsibility of the Police Service to ensure that it adheres to equality requirements or any other aspect of the law in drawing up those contracts. Those particular points need to be considered by the Police Service and any body with which it engages in a contract to provide temporary agency, consultancy or associate staff. Those are issues for those who hold the contract and the employers rather than for the Department per se.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. What lessons are to be learned from the Audit Office report?

Mr Ford: Mr Bradley makes a very reasonable point. The problem is that, at a stage when the PAC is still to hold a further hearing — the PAC has had one hearing, but I understand that it is inviting back representatives from the Police Service, although not to the second departmental hearing — it is difficult for me to say what lessons are to be learned. What is important is that we give the PAC the opportunity to do its work and to consider the issue in full detail. When its report is published, it will be up to all those concerned with such issues, and potentially people in other areas of the public sector, to learn the lessons of the final report when they see it and have had time to study it.

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

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Boxing

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly notes the recent announcement by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to funding for boxing; acknowledges the boxing strategy being developed by Belfast City Council in conjunction with Sport NI and the club development plan being produced by the Ulster provincial boxing council; recognises that there is a need to develop boxing in working-class Protestant areas; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated equitably across communities to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities. — [Miss M McIlveen.]

Which amendments were:

No 1: *Leave out all after "notes" and insert*

"with concern the findings of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club's (SRABC) recent report; further notes the recent announcement by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to funding for boxing; acknowledges the boxing strategy being developed by Belfast City Council in conjunction with Sport NI and the club development plan being produced by the Ulster provincial boxing council, but regrets the council's failure to address the issue of sectarianism highlighted in the report by SRABC; recognises that there is a need to develop boxing in working-class Protestant areas; calls for a Northern Ireland amateur boxing association to be established in order to afford boxers from Northern Ireland the opportunity to compete for the UK at international level; and further calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated equitably across communities to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities." — [Mr Allister.]

No 2: *Leave out all after "develop boxing" and insert*

"; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated

on the basis of need to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities and to ensure that all clubs uphold the highest standards of good relations and the equality standards in sport." — [Mrs McKevitt.]

Mr Swann: Like Michael McGimpsey, I support both amendments. When we talk about boxing, it is important to have an urban and rural strategy. A lot of emphasis is being put on Belfast clubs at the moment, but, as Sammy Douglas said, we have to look outside the greater Belfast area when it comes to supporting boxing clubs. The CAL Committee has visits planned to the All Saints Boxing Club and the Braid Amateur Boxing Club in Ballymena later this month, which I look forward to. I have visited Braid and seen the work that it is doing, not only to develop professional boxers but to work with young people in the area to improve their health and confidence. It is also working on crime prevention in the area, because, when young people focus on the physical activities involved in boxing, they are distracted from other things.

I commend Belfast City Council for the work that it has done to bring forward its boxing strategy. I have contacted the other local councils in North Antrim to ask them to consider doing the same. A number of Members have mentioned how supportive the Minister has been to boxing, and I commend her for that. She has been so supportive that she announced £3.27 million of funding twice. She announced it first on 26 June to the CAL Committee, and she reannounced it during the Olympics to get some headlines and a wee bit of PR for herself.

Mr McCartney: When there was an Ulster Unionist Minister, did he make announcements of any money for boxing?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Swann: I would also point out to the Member that it was UK National Lottery money that she was announcing, so I congratulate her on recognising that.

The £3.27 million will be handled by Sport NI. There has been ongoing concern — all Members raised it today — about where and how the money will be distributed. I congratulate the Minister and Sport NI on the timing of their release of the details of the consultation period on the funding for boxing. It was announced while the debate was going on

earlier. The consultation will close on 8 February, so I would like the Minister to guarantee the timeline for how the money will be spent.

I found the objectives very interesting. Seventy clubs will receive funding for new equipment, 50 clubs will receive funding for premises repairs and up to six clubs will receive funding for major capital works. This is very commendable. Who can apply? An expression of interest form was sent to all clubs that had been affiliated or are presently affiliated to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association from 2009 to 2013. So, the concerns raised by Sandy Row boxing club and other clubs seem to have been addressed when we see who the expression of interest forms were sent to.

The unfortunate aspect is the eligibility criteria. The Minister may want to check things with her officials, but I have a copy of the announcement here for her as well. Who is eligible to apply? For tranche 1, the boxing equipment award will be subject to a single application from the Irish Association of Boxing Clubs and will not be open to individual clubs. So, it does not matter if you were affiliated from 2009 to 2013, unless you are a current member, you will be denied access to tranche 1 funding.

For tranches 2 and 3, which involve money for development, information is being gathered from boxing clubs on facility requirements. The information is being gathered, but the eligibility criteria is all laid down. Funding will only be available if you are affiliated to the International Boxing Association (AIBA) or are recognised by the governing body, which, for any club in Ireland, North or South, is the IABA. So, if you are not affiliated to any of those clubs, you will be denied access to the UK lottery money. This needs to be addressed so that there is equality of access to the money among all the clubs in the boxing fraternity.

Amendment No 1 calls for the establishment of a Northern Ireland boxing fraternity, which is commendable. We have to recognise the bravery of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club for speaking out. It has stood up, despite the fear of losing any sort of funding from the £3.27 million, to ask for the sectarianism that they have seen to be addressed. I refer to something that Ms McCorley said. She asked why Sandy Row had not raised the issue in the past 10 years and whether it had waited until a Sinn Féin Minister was in post. That was not the case. If she had listened to the evidence that was given to us in the CAL Committee, she would have heard the club say that it had been continually working with the Ulster Boxing

Council and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association throughout that time, trying to get redress to all their concerns. There is real concern that the sectarianism that is currently evident in boxing is similar to that which was evident in football 10 or 15 years ago. The IFA has made great steps in its work in rooting that out, not only on the terraces but on the pitch. Ms McCorley's comments were not accurate about the work that has been done there.

Ms McKevitt said boxing was not about red, white and blue or green, white and gold. One of the recommendations that Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club made was exactly as specific as that. It asked for clubs to be allowed to use the red and blue neutral colours that are recognised internationally —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr Swann: — and not the green, white and gold that some clubs are bringing into the boxing arena.

Mr McMullan: We all know what happened on the night of 11 February, and that is basically what is behind this today. It is clear — indeed, it has never been denied by anyone — that what happened on that night was wrong. Indeed, steps were taken on that night to eliminate those who were behind this crime. The people involved were ejected from the premises, and even the PSNI came afterwards and told them that everything that could have been done was done on the night, and they were totally satisfied.

We could talk about all of that, but what is the problem here? The problem is and has been for a while that Sandy Row is not affiliated. We have discussed this at the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, and Mr Swann has picked different items out of the Committee, but this is the nub of the problem and the elephant in the room. Why is it not affiliated? We must try to get it affiliated. In the same meeting, one of the mentors from Sandy Row boxing club said that, now that steps have been taken to do away with this problem, such as the House of Sport being used for weigh-ins for matches, it is better now. It is one of the points in the eight-point plan that the club put forward. He mentioned that he did not have a problem with young people wearing green, white and gold and that that is their choice. He said:

" Proactive steps are being taken, and they should be commended."

We should take a lot out of what that official said. There is a window of opportunity to get Sandy Row boxing club affiliated and back into the family of boxing. We could talk all day about the negative side of things. The only people who suffer are the very people who are pivotal to the motion: children from working-class Protestant areas. Those are the people who are suffering.

It is not a question of whether we want to set up another boxing association to be affiliated somewhere else. Nobody here today — including Mr Allister, who has championed this — has told the House where the funding is coming from for that. Who will fund the youngsters to go to England if they want to go over there? You can do that at the minute if you want to. That is the problem. Mr Allister said that he was a MEP when he first came across this problem. What has he done since that? This has been going on for 10 years. This is not last week, last year or two years ago; this is 10 years ago. If this were happening in my area, I would be beating the door of every Department to see why nothing was being done. Those people are being let down by some of the Members who have been talking today. They should look at themselves when they talk about this.

In March, the Minister made it very clear, in answer to a question from the Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee regarding implementation of the IABA strategic plan in Ulster, that boxing would be open and inclusive for all who take part. The Minister was clear that the process would be based on inclusion and would provide opportunities for the development of boxing clubs from all sections of the community that are affiliated to the governing body. Again, the word "affiliation" comes in. Right around the House, you all know that that is the problem. It is not the Minister. This Minister has done more to put boxing on the world stage than any Minister from this Department has ever done. If you come up with the argument that that is wrong, I would like to hear it, for you have tried today and failed miserably. We have talked about other sports, like rugby, Gaelic football and the IFA, which have all made massive strides to get rid of sectarianism. They are still battling with sectarianism within their own sports, but they are trying and are working together. Mr Humphrey talked about the national anthem being played at Croke Park. He forgets the reason why rugby was played at Croke Park. It was because —

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: No. I will not. Sit down.
[Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr McMullan: Do you forget what the captain of the England team did when he was presented to the president of Ireland? We have raised ourselves above that. We must take this forward.

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

Mr McMullan: All I can say is please do not get hung up on this sectarian thing. The only people who are suffering are the children of these areas. As an Assembly, we must rise above all that and show that we can show leadership.

Mr Hilditch: I support the motion, which has been tabled by my party colleagues. It has been good to listen to the arguments on the amendments.

As a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I acknowledge the work that has been and is being carried out by the stakeholders in the sport, which is referred to in the motion and the amendments. Indeed, the work of the Committee is very much a work in progress, particularly as we continue to pursue the issues raised in the evidence sessions with the stakeholders, including the worrying allegations in the report from Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club. The motion seems to unite contributors, however, in trying to ensure that the funding promised by the Minister for the sport is allocated equitably across the community and fills the glaring void in provision for the game. Therefore, like others, I welcome the £3 million investment in amateur boxing but wish to see that money distributed evenly and fairly throughout all our communities across Northern Ireland and, in particular, to see it bring in from the cold the Protestant and unionist communities, where boxing is currently very underrepresented and where the lack of sports clubs and investment is also evidenced.

The sporting community, as a whole, has suffered from decades of underfunding. So, while we look forward to the commencement of the capital needs assessment of all clubs, there is concern at the outworkings of any funding programme, which has been alluded to in the last few minutes. That could further exacerbate the situation. Areas of underinvestment may again miss out because it has been difficult historically to establish and sustain a club in

those areas, thus reducing eligibility to apply for the capital needs funding. I ask the Minister to comment on that in her address.

To give an example of the differential in facility provision, I look no further than my constituency of East Antrim. There is a good example of a well-run, firmly established club at Monkstown, at the greater Belfast end of the constituency. It plays an integral part in the development of the sport, and I commend it for doing so. However, the story changes somewhat as we move further through the constituency. In the main town, Carrickfergus, there is a perfect example of the lack of investment and the gap in provision for the sport. For many years, the Carrick club boxed out of an old World War II Nissen hut located in the grounds of the local Orange hall. Mr Deputy Speaker, you can only imagine — I think you may even have seen it — what the conditions were like. The boxers had to be totally dedicated to the sport even to set foot inside what can only loosely be described as a building. The current academy uses the very dilapidated basement of a row of hot food bars. Again, it is in very poor shape, and it is no encouragement to the development of the sport. A piece of land has been earmarked and at least provisionally secured for a purpose-built building, but capital funding is not within reach at this stage. That is a typical example of what the motion is attempting to highlight and address. There are many more Paddy Barneses and Michael Conlons out there, but, under the current provisions of the sport, they may never get the chance if they come from a working-class Protestant area.

I was involved in sports administration for many years, and I have raised concerns around governance and structure in the sport. I pay tribute to the many volunteers in the sporting community who put so much into sport in Northern Ireland, and boxing is no different. However, it annoys me at times when some of today's social do-gooders and johnny-come-latelys advocate sport as a way of bringing communities together. I pay tribute to those who have worked tirelessly over the last 40 years, when sport was the only conduit for bringing communities together, and did so through some of the darkest days in Northern Ireland's history. They are all unsung heroes. However, sometimes, if governance is ignored and not given priority or if the structures are not right, the scourge of sectarianism can rear its ugly head, and sport is no different from any other arm of our communities. Many sports — football is one example — have made great strides in stamping out sectarianism and racism. However, as the Minister knows only too well from the situation that arose in her

constituency on Saturday at the Solitude stadium, when a small section of Cliftonville supporters behaved despicably, we cannot take our eye off the ball at any time. We must deal with those unsavoury issues where and when they arise. Boxing is no different.

A greater debate needs to be had on the structure of boxing and the way forward. A lot more detail needs to be looked at, and the Department should take that seriously. In supporting the motion, I appeal to the Minister to ensure that the Ulster Boxing Council, the county boards and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association deal with the matters that affect our communities.

3.45 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank everyone who has spoken so far. I am quite pleased with the tone of the debate. Regardless of where people are coming from and their rationale for tabling the motion or the amendments, it is perfectly clear to me that everyone values the role that boxing has played and continues to play.

I listened to the debate carefully, and I want to make a couple of things clear. First, there is the issue of life beyond Belfast. The Chair of the Committee, Michelle McLveen, introduced that issue, and Robin Swann and others picked up on it. I have responsibility for the entire North, so funding for boxing is for the entire North. Belfast City Council, to its credit, has recognised that boxing as a sport has been hugely underfunded for decades. I will not go into the reasons for that, but it has been hugely underfunded. I feel that, from experience, it is primarily because it is a working-class sport and that people who train in awful conditions to produce champions do not, to their credit, complain too much and by and large get on with it. Belfast City Council, to its credit, has not only brought forward a boxing strategy but has produced a very good template that other councils can lift and use if they so wish. In fact, Andrew Hassard and Rose Crozier, through NILGA, will be making that available, because there is no point in other local councils having to go through work that is already done. If it needs to be tweaked to suit a local area, then do that. We all have a responsibility to make sure that boxing gets as much funding as possible from local government, from the lottery, from central government and from any other source. That is my responsibility as well; I am not ducking out of it.

With regard to the two announcements, I announced the funding in June, and the BBC did the rest. What am I supposed to say: "Don't do that for me. Don't give me any more good PR"? Wise up. Anyway, the good PR was for boxing. Absolutely no one in the House has anything negative to say about the role and the legacy of those clubs. However, in all sports and in all walks of life, we need to challenge, confront, condemn and resolve sectarianism wherever it raises its head and move on. I am not ignoring the fact that there were incidents and that there are still allegations around what happened. I am not ignoring that at all. In fact, I am on the record as condemning it, and I will do it again. I do not think that children involved in any sport — in this case, boxing — should be subject to that sort of abuse. It is ugly, horrible and wrong. Let me be clear about that. Let me also be clear about the fact that we all need to work together to get this resolved. I am not simply paying lip service to that.

When Jim Allister moved his amendment, he talked about the condition of stadiums. Despite the fact that I have asked to go out to Sandy Row, I have absolutely no doubt about what he said. I have absolutely no doubt that the conditions that he referred to exist, because they have existed in most if not all of the clubs that I have so far visited. As I said, boxing seems to get on with it, to its credit, but the situation is not acceptable. For me, as the Minister responsible for sport and for delivering facilities, it is not acceptable that that happens. I do not think that any MLA would take responsibility for letting on or for glossing over boxing's dire need.

Let me confront the point that Jim Allister makes. I want Sandy Row to reaffiliate with the Irish Amateur Boxing Association. What is more, the boxing family wants Sandy Row to do that, because it is good for the sport. If Sandy Row wants to go off and create its own affiliation, it is entirely up to it. Robin Swann mentioned the criteria and said that they excluded Sandy Row. They do not. Sandy Row has been affiliated to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association, so it is entitled to put in an expression of interest, which it has. If you have been affiliated to the Irish Amateur Boxing Association within the past three years, you are entitled to put in for the money, so Sandy Row is not excluded. Sandy Row is not the only non-affiliated club; there are five others. For whatever reason, they decided not to bother. I do not know about the rest. If they have been affiliated within the past three years, they may want to apply, but I am not sure.

Mr Swann: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will, surely.

Mr Swann: I would like clarification on that point. I have the document here, and the paragraph that deals with eligibility for tranche 1 states:

"The boxing equipment award will be the subject of a single application from the IABA."

Are you telling me that the IABA will make applications for non-affiliated clubs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The criteria state that any group affiliated to the IABA within the past three years is eligible for that funding. That is a fact, and it is in the consultation document that was launched on Friday, Robin, unless the Department told me that it was launched on Friday but really launched it only today. I do not know, because I have been in here. My understanding is that it was launched on Friday.

I welcome Karen McKeivitt's amendment on behalf of the SDLP. I welcome the sentiments, because there is a bit of concern. When I saw the amendment, I thought, "What is this about?". To be honest, I wanted to see what way the debate was going. I do not want it to sound as though there is a contradiction, but, if there is a demonstrated need that money needs to go into areas that are, by and large, Protestant working-class areas, that is where it will go. That applies across every one of my arm's-length bodies. That will apply wherever there is a subjective need or a resource need, regardless of how the religious breakdown of the area concerned is described. That is called equality; it is not equity. There is equity when Derry, for instance, gets a boxing club and then Cairn Lodge gets one. I will come on to Cairn Lodge later, William.

Cathal Ó hOisín, Michael McGimpsey and others, such as Chris Lyttle and William Humphrey, mentioned clubs that they had visited. I will go out to Castlereagh and Abbey boxing clubs this week. I have been to Dungiven, and I understand that I will go back to another boxing club before Christmas.

Everyone recognises what boxing has done. Everyone recognises that, despite the conditions, boxing is producing champions, should they be Olympians, world champions or Commonwealth champions. These champions give great leadership and are brilliant role models in their communities. For the most part, they are working-class kids. Most are young working-class boys, but not exclusively. One of

the biggest gaps, as was pointed out, is that there are not as many young girls.

An example of another gap can be seen at Cairn Lodge, the Holy Family Boxing Club and many others, and I have no doubt that I will see it again. Kids are left outside clubs because the facilities are not there. When I was at the Cairn Lodge club recently, 80 kids were there, with at least 60 on its waiting list, and it has not even got a boxing ring. It has bags hanging in a hall that is used by the entire community on Agnes Street. Instead of additional evenings, the number has been cut, which is a tale that can be applied to many clubs. We need to make sure that we put in the resources.

Michael McGimpsey and others mentioned the power of sport — in this case, boxing — and the fact that it promotes mental and physical well-being. Some Members, including David, who has just spoken, mentioned crime prevention and the sense of discipline, the sense of belonging and the sense of being on a team.

It is important to recognise that, wherever sectarianism presents itself, wherever it presents itself, regardless of the sport, we all have a duty to confront it. All of us have a duty to make sure that sectarianism is confronted, particularly when it affects children. Each and every one of us has a duty of care to children, and we need to make sure that we adhere to that.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for giving way and for referring again to sectarianism. Does she agree that the people who make generalised, sweeping statements about "sectarianism in boxing" do an awful disservice to the many people across the communities who have been involved in boxing, in some cases for decades, mostly on a voluntary basis? Does she agree that that does a gross disservice to people such as Tommy Armour and the Warnock brothers — I am going back four or five decades — from the Shankill Road area, who made a massive contribution to boxing not only in the city but beyond? Would she say that the notion of sectarianism across boxing does a great disservice to that community?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is the whole point behind me bringing that issue up. That allegation has hurt the whole boxing community deeply; it really has. One club has labelled the entire boxing community as being either overt or secret bigots or as people who are capable of sectarianism or just waiting for the opportunity

to be sectarian. As the Chair said at the start of the debate, an assumption is made about clubs. Decades ago, the Church may have been involved in helping boxing, and lots of the clubs in Belfast hold on to the parish name. However, the Church got rid of the clubs a long time ago because it needed to develop clubs or community centres. So, the clubs have held on to the parish title but have had to develop their own premises. That is the case across the rural and urban split. I have been to clubs in rural areas that have held on to the parish name but have had to find their own facilities. Assumptions are made because a club may be called after a certain parish. I have met kids from both communities in those clubs, which is pleasing. So, an assumption is made that, because kids come from a St Oliver Plunkett club, a Holy Family club or whatever, by and large, they come from a Catholic community. For kids in another club, the assumption is made that they come from another community. That is not the case. The changeover that has happened in boxing over the decades means that, for other sports, it has led by example. I make that very clear.

Let me also be clear that, as far as I am concerned, the £3.27 million is just the start. It is a start that needs to be welcomed, but Sammy Douglas raised a crucial point. I have given priority to boxing, but I will use the same rule of thumb for sport, the arts, museums, libraries and everywhere else. You need to get out to the communities that are hardest to reach, and you need to make sure that funding goes to objective need. Unless we do that, we will be creating and administering decades of imbalance, underachievement and underinvestment. That is not happening on my watch.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I accept what the Minister says, but the experience in Cairn Lodge, which I mentioned, is that, although your Department indicated that money was to come to the club through Sport NI, it has not been delivered and, I understand, will not be delivered.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That was Sport NI's community capital programme. I have said during other debates but particularly at Question Time that I will find the resources. I will find the resources under monitoring bids. I will make sure that clubs such as those have at least an opportunity. I am not guaranteeing them or anybody else anything else, because I cannot and will not do that. The people who have been left to wither on the vine because they have not got the capability to put in an application should not be penalised either by Sport NI, Belfast City

Council or by anybody else, for that matter. Those days should be put behind us. We need to make sure that, when those bids come in, they are not seen as something that a parish or community or constituency approach is taken to. It should be done on the basis of need. That is where this will happen. It is a start, and it is a good start.

I welcome the debate. It is good that boxing and all its achievements have been brought to the Floor. I appreciate the tone of the debate, despite some of the nonsense that some Members said before. I look forward to making sure that every support is given to the boxing community. Let me be clear: should you box and train in Sandy Row, Cairn Lodge or anywhere else, I am in the boxer's corner. I have got their back, and I will come out fighting.

I will fight for the money for the bid. I will challenge any nonsense, should it be cheap PR stunts or actual, real abuse. Regardless of how it is described, I will challenge it. I will challenge any sporting body that does not step up to the plate, and I will challenge people, when they make allegations, to put up or shut up.

4.00 pm

This has been a good debate. I am delighted that there is so much support for boxing, and my wish is that everybody will take a bigger interest in boxing than they have done in the past. I thank the Members who tabled the motion and those who tabled amendments for the opportunity to speak on this important issue.

Mr D Bradley: Coming to the end of this bout, I feel a bit punch-drunk, but I hope that I will be able to stay on my feet until the end.

I come from a boxing family. My brother fought for the St John Bosco club in Newry and later ran the Clonduff club in Hilltown, so I have some background in it, although I have to admit that I was never a participant myself. In any case, the motion before us today and the associated amendments, although they diverge in their sentiment, have a common element, which is that boxing is a sport that is worthy of support by the Government. It is a sport that demands peak fitness, skill, discipline and courage, all gained by hard, dedicated and prolonged training. It has many positive attributes as a sport, among them the promotion of physical health and mental well-being.

Boxing is also a sport that now attracts boys and girls, many of whom may be hard to reach through other sport, and it quite often places them on a positive trajectory of behaviour, which helps them to avoid other activities that may not be as beneficial to them. Up until now, there has been a fairly modest investment of around £80,000 on average per annum over the past five years. That will be increased to £3.27 million over the years 2012 to 2015.

I believe that Sport NI is taking the right approach by carrying out an exercise to establish the needs of boxing clubs right across the North. The funding should be distributed on the basis of boxing need, whether that be in Catholic or Protestant area, rather than simply the location of clubs. The information that will be gleaned from that study will be used by Sport NI, in conjunction with the boxing governing body, the IABA, to consider how funds can be best used to maximise the benefits for the sport as a whole. Although we should not prejudge the exercise before it is complete, I agree with Miss McIlveen that not all of the funding should be soaked up exclusively in Belfast. I welcome the Minister's assurance today that that will be the case.

The SDLP supports the Sport NI approach and fully expects that the funding will be allocated equitably across communities to fill the gaps in provision, in keeping with the Department's section 75 responsibility, as the motion and the two amendments express.

If there are needs in one area or another, this particular piece of work should reveal those needs. I expect that the results of this work will be made available to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee at the earliest possible opportunity. It would be helpful if the Minister could give us an undertaking that that will be the case.

The report from the Sandy Row club on incidents of sectarianism at various boxing venues was, as Members said, very disturbing. I am sure that all those who are interested in the promotion of the sport will be eager to ensure that boxing is free of that type of behaviour. The Sandy Row eight-point plan is being implemented by the Irish Amateur Boxing Association and the Ulster Boxing Council, and is being overseen by Sport NI. I welcome that. Along with implementing the eight-point plan, the UBC should adopt the equality standard for sport. The SDLP believes that the various strategies in the club development plan should be well co-ordinated and funded, and should be situated clearly in that standard, which embraces the spirit of all equality legislation and

is committed to eradicating any unfair discrimination.

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

Mr D Bradley: Mr Allister's amendment calls for a Northern Ireland amateur boxing association to be established. He has, quite often, told us that we should not call for things in the House over which the House has no control. This is one such thing. There is little evidence from boxing clubs that there is a demand for such an association.

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

Mr D Bradley: If there is that demand, it is up to those on the ground to bring it about.

Mr Allister: It is interesting that despite some people's lamenting the fact that the Sandy Row boxing club made allegations, which were publicised, no one in the debate has refuted any of those allegations. That is the abiding imprint of the debate; the reality that, sadly, in the sport, this club and others have been subjected to sectarian harassment. The question is whether we are exercised to do something about it.

In response to Mr Swann in particular, the Minister said that Sandy Row boxing club was not prohibited from availing itself of the current round of funding because, at some point since 2009, it had been affiliated. I think that the Minister has to make up her mind. I have in my hand a written reply from her to a question dated 28 September 2012 which asks precisely for an assurance that Sandy Row boxing club would be eligible for funding. The answer states that:

"in line with all Sport NI club based programmes, direct funding is only currently being considered for boxing clubs that are governing body affiliated."

Therefore, if Sandy Row boxing club, as of today, is not affiliated, I interpret that answer to mean that the club is shut out of funding. The Minister is trying to suggest something else today. That is an advance. However, I really think that she has to decide which way she is facing on this issue.

There has been some avoidance —

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Member for giving way. I just want to make him and the House aware of an issue related to affiliation. The

Member will be aware that a Belfast City Council boxing strategy will be implemented soon. Significant amounts of money have been set aside for that. I assure the Member, the House and Sandy Row boxing club that no such affiliation is required for council money to be sought and obtained by that boxing club.

Mr Allister: I am grateful for that, as will, I am sure, Sandy Row boxing club.

I will turn to the issue about which some people have been reluctant to talk; one that really goes to the core of equality and which many people like to talk about in the most generic fashion. It is the issue of why young people who are affiliated to boxing and see their attachment to the British nation are prohibited from competing under the colours of their nation, and why it is that those who say that they are great enthusiasts for the Belfast Agreement are reluctant, when it comes to boxing, to implement the portion of it, which I quoted earlier, about the right to identify oneself and to be accepted as Irish or British or both as one may choose. Why is it that there is that blind spot with Sinn Féin Members in particular as to the right of the young Protestant participant in boxing to be able to be affiliated to an organisation which would enable him or her to fight for the United Kingdom?

Mr McElduff: Did that situation pertain during the stewardship of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure by Michael McGimpsey, Edwin Poots, Gregory Campbell and Nelson McCausland?

Mr Allister: That situation may well have prevailed before I came to the House, but it is certainly a position in the House that I am determined to highlight, and that is what I am doing today.

It is very simple: either it is right or it is wrong that boxers in Northern Ireland who have no affinity to the Irish Republic should nonetheless have to wrap themselves in the Irish tricolour in order to be able to box in the Olympics. That cannot be right. They have to have the right to box for the United Kingdom. It is that fundamental right — that fundamental principle — that I say that the House should be voting for in voting for the amendment that I propose. I trust that it will do that. It is a seminal touchstone for all the words of many who talk about even-handedness and equality — all the buzzwords that they love to trot out. Well, today is the day to decide, regardless of whether you are from the Alliance Party, which sat on the fence on this issue; the SDLP, which

seemed to be against it; or Sinn Féin, which predictably is against it. Today is the day when you declare yourself on this amendment — am I for perpetuating the inequity that young people from Northern Ireland cannot, in this sport, fight, appear and compete for the country to which they are proud to belong? That cannot be right. As I said, by your votes, we shall know you in the House today.

Mr Weir: At the conclusion of the debate, I thank all those who have taken part. There has been a bit of verbal sparring across the Chamber, but it has been kept, I think, in a good tone by all involved.

The mover of the motion said at the outset that it was not a sectarian motion. Indeed, the intention of the motion was to ensure benefits for all and inclusivity. It is certainly the case that it is not a sectarian motion, but there has been acknowledgement from all sides of the House that sectarianism is an issue that needs to be addressed. Sadly —

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way.

I am on my feet to clarify a point that I made during my contribution earlier — Mr McMullan would not give way — in response to the suggestion from Mr Ó hOisín in relation to Ulster rugby games.

My point was that when the Ulster rugby football union hosts a game in Belfast that is an IRFU game — regardless of whether it is an international, junior international or whatever — the Union flag is not flown and the national anthem is not played at Ravenhill. Mr McMullan made the point that when the Irish team plays at the new Aviva stadium, 'God Save the Queen' be played there as well. I would welcome that. I am sure that you would have more difficulty with it, though.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his intervention. Obviously, Mr Ó hOisín got his Ravenhills, Croke Parks and Aviva stadiums mixed up a bit. The Hansard report will indicate what the Member said.

There is a need to address sectarianism. For example, it is disappointing, as has been pointed out to me, that, as late as last night, Wayne McCullough received abuse on a social media site simply for wearing a poppy. He was described as a traitor to his country because he did so.

It is also the case, as pointed out by the mover of the motion and others, that, when we are

dealing with sectarianism, racial abuse or any other form of discrimination, it is not a majority position within boxing. Indeed, it is a much wider issue — a societal issue. However, where sectarianism raises its head — I am glad that there has been condemnation of it from all sides of the House today — we need to address it. One of the Members opposite talked about the issue of affiliation. Clubs and individuals, when affiliating, need to have a degree of confidence that their concerns are being properly addressed.

I want to deal briefly with the two amendments. As the party that proposed the motion, the DUP does not have a problem with either amendment.

I turn first to Mr Allister's amendment. He makes a central point that people from a sporting background should be able to choose their affiliation. My preference, which I suspect would be his as well, would be that any sportsperson from Northern Ireland would compete for a British team. I think that even Mr Allister would acknowledge that neither he nor I can impose that on people. However, we do have to see a situation in which anyone is at least given the freedom of opportunity to compete for different teams. That is particularly pertinent where we have a sport that involves individuals. We saw, for example, in the Olympics, a number of sportspeople from Northern Ireland competing for either the Irish Republic team —

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: Briefly.

4.15 pm

Mr D Bradley: On the point about a separate Northern Ireland boxing association, does the Member agree that that is a matter for the clubs involved in the sport on the ground to decide, and not one for the House or even the Minister? If there were a desire for that, surely it would have been brought about by now.

Mr Weir: With respect, that clearly is not something that we can impose from above. However, as we have seen with cycling, which is a sport that I am very familiar with, there was an attempt to form a body and, indeed, one was eventually formed that is affiliated with the British bodies. That body faced years of discrimination and of obstacles being put in its path. The basic principle is that people should be able to choose which country they want to represent. For example, a number of

footballers have chosen to play for the Republic of Ireland. As a Northern Ireland fan, I am not particularly keen on that, but I have to accept it. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Take a look at what happens in athletics. Down the years, a number of people from Northern Ireland have competed in the Olympics for either the Irish Republic or team GB. That opportunity is there. However, even where that is permitted, we need to make sure that obstacles are not put in someone's path. Look, for instance, at hockey.

A Member: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Weir: I have to move on. I am sure the Member was about to make a very sage point, which I am sure I would agree with, but I have to move on.

So, there is a basic principle in what Mr Allister said that I think we would support. Similarly, we are comfortable with the SDLP amendment. Our motion specifically mentions the need to target Protestant working-class areas in particular. It is our belief that that is where the strongest need is, but we are happy to accept that, if it is an issue of objective need, that will be highlighted by that. So, we are comfortable with its suggestion.

It is true that, during the debate, a number of Members covered a lot of common ground. There was a long list of inspirational boxers, which, if read out, could fill the next five minutes, from Muhammad Ali to Katie Taylor, Nicola Adams to Carl Frampton, Wayne McCullough to Barry McGuigan and a host of others. They have been and, indeed, continue to be an inspiration.

A number of Members, including the proposer of the motion, Robin Swann and Michael McGimpsey, highlighted the positive benefits of boxing, from a physical and medical point of view, in providing good physical and mental health. Indeed, it also has wider societal benefits, as it provides a productive route, particularly for young people, and I think that it has played a very positive role in dealing with antisocial behaviour and underachievement.

Jim Allister and the proposer of the motion mentioned the debt of gratitude to volunteers, and, again, a number of Members acknowledged that.

One constant theme was the range of examples provided, from the rural hall that was taken over in Mr Ó hOisín's area to the examples in east

Belfast, Sandy Row and a range of other places. That is why all of us, I think, welcome the Minister's remarks and the commitment to the level of funding. Historically, boxing has been underfunded, which has meant that a number of facilities need help. There has to be a commitment to all of Northern Ireland, and again, I welcome the Minister's remarks in that regard. She referred to Abbey boxing club, which I know plays a very positive role in Bangor, and I commend it. Indeed, a range of boxing clubs have played a positive role across Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, what is at the heart of the motion is identifying need and ensuring that that need is met. A number of Members spoke about the gaps throughout Northern Ireland that need to be addressed. It is important that a signal is sent out to all boxing clubs across Northern Ireland that their funding requirements will not be ignored and, indeed, that we will go beyond simply saying, "We will ensure that everybody has an opportunity". I think that there is an important onus on the Department, the Sports Council and, indeed, all within the sector to ensure that, from a funding point of view, that is proactively pursued.

We want to see people coming forward, and we want a clear message to be sent out that no boxing club will feel excluded. Indeed, as the Minister herself said, we need to ensure that this does not create a situation where clubs that are behind others in respect of capacity are penalised.

In addressing the problems of the historic underfunding of boxing, it is important that we do not entrench division or create further inequality. Therefore, a commitment needs to be made across the board.

It is important that we do not have only a few well-run and successful boxing clubs. It is about the entire sector, and that commitment must go across the sectarian divide and throughout Northern Ireland. If we can embrace that, we can make a positive contribution to a noble sport, and I hope that the House can unite around it.

The DUP will support Mr Allister's amendment. We are happy with the SDLP amendment, but we also urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that, if the amendment is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2 as the wording of the original motion will have been changed to

such an extent that it would not be in order for the House to vote on amendment No 2 as well.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 42.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Allister and Mr McNarry

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Eastwood and Mr Ó hOisín

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 42.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr

Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McNarry, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Eastwood and Mr Ó hOisín

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern the findings of Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club's (SRABC) recent report; further notes the recent announcement by the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure in relation to funding for boxing; acknowledges the boxing strategy being developed by Belfast City Council in conjunction with Sport NI and the club development plan being produced by the Ulster provincial boxing council, but regrets the council's failure to address the issue of sectarianism highlighted in the report by SRABC; recognises that there is a need to develop boxing in working-class Protestant areas; calls for a Northern Ireland amateur boxing association to be established in order to afford boxers from Northern Ireland the opportunity to compete for the UK at international level; and further calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to ensure that the funding is allocated equitably across communities to fill identifiable gaps in provision for the sport, in keeping with her Department's section 75 responsibilities.

4.45 pm

Construction Industry

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other contributors will have five minutes.

Mr Byrne: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the current plight of the construction industry; and calls on the Executive to prioritise the proposed maintenance and capital spending plans of each Department, to stimulate the local economy and support jobs within the construction industry.

This motion is extremely timely, as the construction industry, which is already one of the hardest-hit in this recession, had a further blow with last week's announcement of the job losses at Pattons.

The construction industry is in crisis, the primary cause of which is a lack of work. Not many contracts are being issued. There are virtually no private sector projects at the moment except for some retail schemes. The sector has fallen most dramatically from £2.4 billion in new works in 2005 to about £1.6 billion in 2011 and is still dropping.

Very few capital works schemes are coming forward in the public sector. There are very few newbuild schools; there are currently 15 schools projects in the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) system but they cannot be advanced until the Department of Education's business case is concluded. When that has been done it will have to be further examined by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP).

Very little social housing is being built, although I note that, today, the Minister of Finance and Personnel announced an £8 million diversion into the co-ownership schemes. Very few new hospital builds or extensions are currently taking place. Indeed, we have very few public roads schemes except for some maintenance schemes that are currently in the pipeline.

In 2007, the construction industry was worth £3 billion. This year, the net worth is about £1 billion, which represents a £2 billion drop in five years. The consequence is that there are 25,000 fewer jobs in construction today than there were five years ago. The reality is that a massive contraction is taking place in the construction industry. One of the biggest outworkings of that is that we have what is called below-cost or sub-economic tendering. Many big contractors are going out of business. Indeed, a lot of them have already gone out of business.

Pattons is the most recent example, and it is causing massive concern in the industry. It is a 100-year-old company from Ballymena with over 300 workers directly employed. In addition many subcontractors, about whom we do not hear much in the media, are being badly hit. Many of them were present today at a meeting in this Building, which was attended by 85 people who represented between 30 and 40 subcontracting companies.

Many hundreds of workers in the subcontracting sector are going to be directly affected. In my constituency of West Tyrone, McCann Brothers (Ire) Ltd of Seskinore ran into difficulty some weeks ago and was put into receivership. That has had an impact on two major schemes. Ordinary workers did not get paid for four weeks. That is not good for the industry and it is very severe for the workers involved.

The GAA centre at Garvaghy has been badly hit because a £3 million contract with McCann Brothers has been put on ice. A Loretto school at Kilkenny has also been stopped because the McCanns went into liquidation. Many main and secondary contractors, as well as builders and providers, on these schemes are left suffering badly. In the case of the new South West Acute Hospital, many small subcontractors were never paid. The main contractor and one or two of the larger subcontractors were paid, but many of the smaller ones were not paid.

How can anyone carry on in business if they are not paid for the work that they do? Protection of subcontractors must be addressed by this Assembly. Too often, subcontractors are the forgotten victim when a firm enters administration. They fall far down the list when it comes to the settling of debts, and they regularly lose out.

There is a way to address this. For some time, industry representatives have promoted public project bank accounts, whereby specific accounts are opened for public works projects.

All moneys are paid into the account and then passed on to the relevant contractors and subcontractors rather than to the lead contractor. One of subcontractors' greatest gripes is that they feel that they are far down the chain and are last in line to get paid. Public project bank accounts would help remove the serious risk that the subcontractors here today have had to face when the bigger company gets into difficulty before outstanding financial matters have been resolved.

Many construction companies were badly hit as a result of the property development collapse. Unfortunately, some construction companies diverted into property development and have suffered debt burden consequences. The banking pressures are adding to the problem of managing cash flow. Banks are being ruthless. Talk to anybody in the industry, and they will tell you that they are getting harrowing phone calls and letters daily. The public are asking: can this Executive put some pressure on the banks? They want to know that, particularly given that Ulster Bank is part of a public sector-owned bank and that First Trust is really a publicly owned bank backed by the Irish Government.

There is a combination of factors and problems leading to a crisis in business confidence in the industry. Many professional businesses related to construction are also affected. These include architects, quantity surveyors, civil engineers and consulting engineering firms. They are all hanging on by their fingernails. They are all employing staff for whom they do not really have work. They are hoping and waiting for an upturn. Many building supply firms are suffering badly as well. Many of them are suffering multiple hits as more and more construction companies go out of business. I could name building supply companies here that have had multiple hits in the last two years.

The fall of one construction company has a domino effect. It is like a pack of cards. So many are affected, and many cannot continue like this.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for giving way. He makes an excellent point about the pack of cards. Today's meeting was great to realise the effect that the Patton group going to administration will have on our local economy. It was tallied up that the companies that were represented in the Assembly today are owed a combined £15 million. They have a grand total of 2,000 employees, which would make them one of our largest companies if they were all together. Does the Member agree that we

need to act urgently in respect of those 2,000-plus employees?

Mr Byrne: I fully agree with the Member. This crisis has to be addressed seriously. There has to be a change in company law to try to recognise that bona fide subcontractors have real concerns and a plight that needs to be addressed.

Procurement and tendering bureaucracy in the construction sector is also very frustrating. I appeal to the Minister that that issue ought to be addressed. The Patton group had a turnover of £140 million in the last year. Unfortunately, it posted a £7 million loss in the same period.

According to the 'Belfast Telegraph' dated 6 November, the Patton group decision was brought on by "extremely challenging trading conditions". That is what is facing every construction company. John Armstrong, managing director of the Construction Employers Federation (CEF), said on 17 October, in response to further a reduction in activity in the area:

"Looking ahead CEF has serious concerns that activity levels will fall further as the cuts to investment in public buildings and infrastructure continue to bite. Every £1 million reduction in construction output results in the loss of over 28 jobs and takes £3 million out of the wider economy."

This is one industry in which the multiplier effects can bring great benefits if money is being put into the sector. However, equally, if money is being taken out of the sector, the downward spiral is catastrophic.

On 22 October, he also wrote:

"the Executive has recently published the Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021. The ten year plan was not actually published until a year and a half in to the ten year period. Disappointingly, even with such a substantial delay, the strategy falls down on a number of counts. As a forward looking document it suffers from a fundamental failing – it puts more focus on the past and the present than on the future."

It is crucial that the plight of the industry is heard in the House. We just had a debate on boxing, but this is the one issue that is causing big problems. There has been a massive number of job losses, bankruptcy and pain experienced by workers and managers of

construction companies. We need to address that.

Mrs Overend: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Department," and insert

"to encourage and facilitate more investment in public-private infrastructure projects during this Assembly mandate, and to lobby Her Majesty's Treasury for a reduced rate of VAT for the repair, maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings to stimulate the local economy and support jobs within the construction industry."

First, I commend the SDLP for tabling the motion, which could not be more timely, given the terrible news last week that the Patton Group was in financial difficulties and the subsequent news that it has been placed in administration.

The Patton Group is a nationally and internationally renowned, family run business that is celebrating its centenary year. I am sure I speak for everyone in the House when I express great sadness at the events of the past week. There have been reports that up to two thirds of the workforce at the Patton Group could be lost, which is devastating for those people and their families. That is the latest blow to a declining industry, and the sector has been left reeling from it.

As others have said, just this afternoon, I, along with many other MLAs, met a huge delegation of the subcontractors affected. The Patton effect could hit more than 2,000 employees of subcontractors and small and medium-sized businesses, which could be owed around £15 million. That is a shocking statistic that was revealed at this afternoon's meeting.

There is also a wider effect on the economy to consider, given that the news comes on the back of nearly 800 job losses at FG Wilson and the knock-on effect that that has had on its supply chain. The Enterprise Minister is still refusing to clarify the details of that for commercial reasons.

Today's debate may not be able to help those construction workers we met this afternoon as it is short-term assistance that they require. So, I challenge the Executive and the Ministers to explore areas in which help can be given urgently.

I want to speak specifically about the decline that has been evident in the construction

industry since 2007. In doing so, the most recent Northern Ireland Construction Bulletin, which was published less than a month ago, is perhaps the best place to start. That bulletin made for worrying reading, as it clearly outlines that the total volume of construction output in Northern Ireland in the second quarter of 2012 decreased by 8·2% compared with first quarter. That comes after three consecutive quarters of growth in construction output and shows that no recovery is under way. It is also the sharpest quarterly decline since the recession took hold.

The value of construction output in real prices in quarter 2 of 2012 was the lowest quarterly value recorded in the past five years. There was a 10·3% quarter-on-quarter volume decrease in housing output. There was a 25·1% decrease in infrastructure output in the second quarter of 2012 compared with the first quarter. The category entitled, "Other Work", which includes work associated with factories, schools, hospitals and agriculture, decreased by 1·7% over the quarter, according to figures from DFP.

5.00 pm

According to figures from DFP, we have suffered 17 quarters of decline in employee jobs in construction up to the second quarter of 2012. That means that the number of construction jobs has fallen from a high of nearly 47,000 in 2007 to just over 30,000 now. To put all that in some kind of headline figure, construction output is now 40% below its pre-recession peak. It is also true that, relatively speaking, the GB construction sector has experienced a less severe downturn than that in Northern Ireland. Those statistics are important indicators of where we are, and they illustrate the scale of the challenge that the Executive face in creating an environment for sustainable growth in the construction industry.

The Ulster Unionist amendment comes in two parts. The first is our desire to see the Executive facilitate and encourage more investment in public-private partnerships in infrastructure projects. Two large public-private partnership examples are set out in the investment strategy, and they concern drinking water quality and waste water treatment. The Omega waste water PPP project is delivering improved treatment standards for 20% of the total waste water that NI Water receives, and the Alpha water PPP project is delivering new treatment facilities for over 50% of drinking water.

The investment strategy also has a commitment to:

"actively engage with institutional investors in order to attract inward investment into public-private infrastructure."

The strategy also deals extensively with alternative funding options and sets out many of the advantages of working with the private sector. Therefore, I think that we in the House are all broadly on the same page in thinking that there is validity in looking at collaboration between the public and private sectors. Some may be more enthusiastic than others, but we should all be committed to looking at the options.

The Ulster Unionist Party's main issue is the time frame in which alternative financing options will be introduced. IN appendix 2 of the investment strategy demonstrates it can be seen that there is no commitment to use alternative financing until between 2015 and 2021, when £390 million for the Department for Regional Development, £200 million for the Department of Education and £500 million for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will be sought. The question that we pose today is whether any of that potential finance can be tapped into now to support growth and recovery and to create jobs during this Assembly mandate, which is when it is potentially most needed. I understand that there may be an argument that we need to wait until the next CSR Budget before committing to alternative financing, but unemployment is rising fast now, and, as things stand, our recovery is already behind that of the rest of the United Kingdom. That area also has been flagged up by the CBI following events at Patton's, and it needs to be considered. We are simply calling on the Executive to give the various financing options due consideration. For example, we have private finance initiative contracts in the health service in relation to various health and social care trusts. Although that model is not suitable for all capital projects, we should consider whether it can be developed further.

Lastly on this aspect of our amendment, I want to briefly mention the UK guarantee scheme that George Osborne announced. That scheme is for nationally significant projects that are shovel-ready but are struggling to access private finance because of adverse credit conditions. The Treasury would step in behind these projects, and, at the time of the announcement was in July, the aim was to provide public guarantees of up to £50 billion of private investment in infrastructure and exports, with the intention of accelerating major infrastructure investment. Are we in Northern Ireland considering our own eligibility for the

scheme? We should be, and I will be interested to hear a response on that point.

The second part of the Ulster Unionist Party amendment concerns a reduction in VAT for the repair, maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings and is, therefore, a matter that needs to be negotiated with the Treasury. This is a policy that my party has advocated since as far back as 2010, and my colleagues will further investigate it in the debate. We debated a motion in the House on 10 September that called for a reduction in VAT for the hospitality sector. Although the hospitality sector is crucial, especially for tourism, one reason that my party voted against that motion is that we believe that, if we reduce VAT for certain sectors, we must prioritise the construction industry. As Members know, European rules dictate that we can have only a certain number of areas that are subject to VAT reduction. Every member state in the EU must apply VAT at a standard rate, which can be anything between 15% and 25%. All countries can also have up to two reduced rates of between 5% and 15%. There is certainly an argument for the construction industry to have one of those reduced rates. An increased market for the repair, maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings could provide a real boost to the construction sector, and the evidence base is there, as the Isle of Man has operated this with success for over a decade.

I urge the House to support the reasonable and pragmatic amendment from the Ulster Unionist Party. It calls for due consideration to be given to alternative finance initiatives, as well as to a reduced VAT rate. Our construction sector is failing and needs help. I believe that the measures in our amendment would bring improvements.

Mr Girvan: We all recognise the problem that the construction industry faces in our Province, and I am glad to see that both the motion and the amendment have come up to speed with what the DUP was trying to do earlier in this session.

I want to move in on part of the point. A lot of focus is going on the public spend, and, granted, that is the part on which we can have some influence. The Executive are spending £1.3 billion on capital projects this year. My point is that there might be additional moneys drawn in from local government for capital projects. Those areas need to be looked at seriously. Some £32 million was announced, and it was announced today that some of that money will be spent on schools and road projects. It is all very well to spend, but we

must ensure that contractors and those who tender, when they get the job, give a fair crack of the whip to those who are subbing from them. That was the story that came out today. The subcontractors are sometimes the bank to the main contractor. It is evident that some main contractors are using the subbies' money to keep themselves afloat. A number of initiatives have been put in place. The prompt payment scheme was brought forward, and, in that, we went over and above what was proposed in other areas of the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, that is not filtering down the line to the subbies. That is why we are in such a predicament today.

An announcement was made about 300-odd jobs that will potentially be lost at Patton. That does not take into account the thousands of jobs that could be affected through the subcontractors associated with Patton. That is an area that we should take seriously. We should put forward contract law that protects the subcontractors and ensures that, when payments are made, they get a fair crack of the whip and receive that payment.

I appreciate that there are a number of things to take into account, one of which is the downturn in the residential housing market. The price of residential property is probably 7% lower than it was in the first quarter of 2005 and approximately 50% lower than it was in 2007. We are dealing with that, and it will have a knock-on effect. The only mechanism that we have is to ensure that, when public contracts are awarded, we target them at the areas where they will be most effective.

Last week, it was announced that the Executive had decided that £200 million would be spent. That is a jobs initiative, and some of that money will target areas where the contract industry can take advantage of it. Northern Ireland contractors have taken advantage in the past: 96% or 97% of all contracts awarded here are awarded to Northern Ireland-based companies. We want to ensure that that money circulates and stays in Northern Ireland. I appreciate that some people will say that we also have to tender for contracts outside Northern Ireland and that some Northern Ireland contractors have been very successful in getting work outside Northern Ireland and have brought back some skills to the industry here.

We have a job of work to do. I heard the plight and the testimonies of people today who told us that they could lose their home as the result of another firm going bankrupt. There is nothing wrong with them, but the drawing down of the funding has had a major impact.

Other initiatives have been announced. The co-ownership scheme will bring in funds. I know that people have mentioned £8 million. I had a figure of £10 million. Two major funders — Barclays Bank and the Bank of Ireland — are each putting in £25 million, giving us a total of £50 million to go towards newbuild —

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

Mr Girvan: I am sorry, I did not realise that time had gone so quickly. I really think that we need to focus on what the Executive can do for our construction industry and target contracts accordingly.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the supporters of the motion for bringing the matter forward. It is timely, given the situation with Patton's and the domino or ripple effect that that will have on the entire local economy. Patton's, of course, is located in my constituency of North Antrim. Last week, I spoke to a number of subcontractors, and we were to arrange a meeting today. There was only supposed to be a handful of them, but it soon spiralled way beyond that. As Members saw today, more than 80 subcontractors packed into a room on the third floor, and some of the human stories that we heard were really depressing. We are talking about SMEs and microbusinesses. Some, perhaps, have only two or three employees but are owed £200,000 or £300,000, and they cannot see a way out of the situation. It is deeply depressing, especially as we are in the run-up to Christmas.

Departments need to explore what they can do. To be fair to the Finance Minister, it was only a number of days ago that we were discussing what we could do about this, and legislation has been brought forward. However, subcontractors get a bad deal in such situations, and we need to explore further what we can do to protect them when larger contractors go to the wall. Today, quite rightly, many subcontractors were angry about that. I do not think that it is an acceptable situation. There may be certain European regulations and so on that we could make our way through, so we need to explore that and make it a priority. We cannot allow what happened to those subcontractors and what could happen to those 2,000-plus employees to happen again. Quite simply, it is grossly unfair, as the subcontractors carry the can. In some instances, the main contractors may fold and start again. However, in many cases, a lot of the smaller enterprises will go to the wall, which will affect their personal finances and is quite worrying.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McKay: Yes.

Mr Storey: Does the Member agree that not only do we need to highlight the problems today, we also need to try to identify solutions? Does he also agree that one of the difficulties has been that Departments, in particular the Department of Education, changed the rules? I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of Ballymoney High School. When a PPP project was put in place six years ago, the Department of Education changed the rules and decided to go down a conventional procurement route. Today, neither Rainey Endowed School in Magherafelt nor Ballymoney High School have got their newbuild, and that, clearly, was because of the way in which that Department decided to abandon a contract and go for something different.

5.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McKay: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is a problem across all Departments, and I think that we can do a lot on the public-private side of this with regard to Departments and the local councils, which we heard about today as well. Obviously, we need to ensure that there are protections in place on the solely private side of things. Of course, the Executive recognised in their £200 million announcement that construction boosts the economy and provides that immediate job in the arm to the economy at times like this. We need to continue to focus on that.

The Member for South Antrim referred to the fact that the housing market has, quite clearly, slowed down immensely. The construction sector has already taken a huge hit. A lot of employees have moved out of the sector, reskilled and gone on to other things, and some have emigrated to Australia or the United States. We have to protect what we have and ensure that those employees have a role to play with regard to export as well. Employees of one of the subcontractors referred to today are in Wales, Scotland, England or Europe. They are doing their work and bringing that money home every week to spend in our local economy. All of that needs to be taken into consideration.

We need to look at what we can do immediately for the Patton subcontractors. How do we deal

with the cash flow problems? The banks certainly are not helping. I know that Invest NI has loan mechanisms in place, but we need to explore as a matter of urgency what we can do in that case. Perhaps the Minister will comment on his own ideas. We need fresh ideas on this situation, as a number of employees could be out of a job within a matter of days or weeks. Moving forward, from the Department of Finance's point of view —

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

Mr McKay: We need to ensure that protections are put in place to protect subcontractors.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion and the amendment.

A lot of people have mentioned Patton. Patton is the biggest warning sign yet of how far gone the construction industry is. Other companies have gone for different reasons. They have been affected by the downturn in the value of land, the contracts coming out of places like this and the attitude of the banks. The fact that NAMA is coming over the horizon in a bigger way will influence the whole situation as well. Let us face it: some of those companies were reliant purely on house building, which has suffered a savage downturn. Patton is a well-run company, with various divisions. From what I hear about Patton, there may be some hope for some of its activities. I do not think that it has come a cropper purely in terms of house building, but we will have to wait and see. I fear for the subcontractors; they are in an awful situation. I think somebody mentioned that Patton has a turnover of £140 million, and Mr Byrne mentioned that the total value of the construction sector was £1 billion. To me, that means that Patton is worth 14% of the construction industry in this country. That is so serious. Who will be next? I hear other names mentioned. I certainly would not want to say them in public, but everybody is in trouble. It is not beyond belief that we could end up without a viable construction industry here in the next couple of years. Whatever we can do, in a big way or in a small way, is absolutely vital.

I will talk briefly about the education sector. I believe that the Minister has gone as far as he can go in terms of newbuild school contracts for the time being, certainly for this year. In the past few days, an extra £10 million was granted for school maintenance. That is good news. I think that brings the total available up to about £40 million. That is £40 million against a turnover for the industry of £1 billion. It is pretty

small beer, but, if it keeps some companies going, fair enough. It worries me that all of that is connected with what is going on in the education sector — the viability audits, the area-based planning. I do not want us to spend money on the maintenance of schools that will be closed. Hopefully, we can correlate those two things so that we do not do that.

As for the planning system, what can you say about John Lewis? There was a potential major contract for the private sector that would not have cost the public sector a penny, and, after eight, nine or maybe even 10 years now, nothing has gone ahead. I know that it is under judicial review, but it has not been under judicial review for 10 years. What on earth happened to it in the first eight years of its genesis? As an ex-member of Lisburn council, I really despair. There is work waiting to go. Whether Westfield or the authorities would actually go ahead with it if they got permission right now is open to question, because it is not a great time, but it is an opportunity lost.

The amendment calling for a reduced rate of VAT for the maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings is a very good idea and something that has been under consideration across the water. It seems odd to me that there is no VAT on a newbuild domestic property and only 5% if it involves a renewable contract but a house extension attracts VAT at 20%. It is the same work, the same contractors and the same materials. That just does not seem sensible. To be honest, I do not fully understand VAT; I worked in a business that did not attract VAT. My accountant used to say that I should get down on my knees every day and give thanks. The gaming industry does not attract any VAT. If you want to buy a helicopter, you do not pay VAT.

Mr Wilson: How many have you got?

Mr Lunn: Well, some of our biggest property developers were running helicopters when times were good. The point is that there is 0% VAT. Where is the logic in allowing somebody to buy a helicopter without a VAT charge —

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

Mr Lunn: — but to charge them 20% VAT if they want to extend their house? We support the motion and the amendment and hope for a better time for the industry.

Mr Frew: This is a very important debate. I express my sympathy to the Patton Group,

employees of which are from and work in North Antrim, my constituency. The Patton Group has employed, throughout the many years of its existence, many thousands of workers. We are at the point now where it has a workforce of 300. Those left are desperately clinging on to their job, and many have lost their job. I have worked alongside many of those people. Being from the electrical industry myself, I have worked with many electrical contractors over the years, alongside Patton and many of the main contractors in Northern Ireland. I certainly recognise what they are going through. I certainly feel their pain. I went through the process that many of them are now in due to a company going into administration. I have lived through that, along with my work colleagues, and have worked alongside the people who are now in that situation. I have grave concerns not only for the workforce of 300 at Patton but for the 3,000-plus workforce throughout the subcontractor, supply and wholesale chains, due to the fallout of what has happened to Patton. If Patton is, if you like, a nuclear bomb in the construction industry, we still await the fallout of what will happen to the subcontractors.

I welcome the £200 million economy and jobs initiative, which complements the economic strategy, investment strategy and Programme for Government that this Government, this Executive, have in place. That is very important and very good. It shows that the Government are listening and can react when they need to. It shows that strategies are in place that are flexible enough to evolve as required when there is greater or targeted need. Indeed, this motion is in a similar spirit, and its detail is in the same vein as the actions of the Executive only last week.

The Government and the Departments have done incredible work on prompt payment. We have only to look at the table to see that our Departments are hitting 90%, 97%, 95% and 94% of prompt payments being paid within 30 days. We may throw millions of pounds at investment and at the construction industry, but, unless that prompt payment falls down from the main contractors across the spectrum of the construction industry to the subcontractors, the mechanics, the electricians, the plumbers and the fire alarm specialists, the construction industry will be in trouble. We need prompt payments across the board. The Government have done that. They have acted and have come up with prompt payments, but what the Government need to do better is to scrutinise how those prompt payments are measured and pushed down to everybody involved.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The majority of the jobs that we hope to create out of last week's initiative will go to subcontracting companies and specialists. It is a natural progression in the construction industry at the moment, where most of our main contractors employ many people but subcontract most of the work. A specialist in the electrical and mechanical constructors will create those jobs and have those skills. I am fearful for those people today, and we have to make sure that the situation improves. It is not about prompt payments only. The sub-economic tendering process has caused the construction industry to enter a race to the bottom. That needs to be checked out. We need the COPEs in our Departments to scrutinise, audit, stock check — whatever you want to call it — the work and the contracts that have been done in the past five years to see the practices that are in place —

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

Mr Frew: — and to try to engage with the main contractors to improve that and to get rid of sub-economic tendering. I could say so much more, but my time is up.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the proposer of the motion and welcome the opportunity to participate in this critical debate for our economy. It is important to reflect on the statistics and, as previous contributors have said, to consider the fact that construction accounts for approximately £1.3 billion of the total spend from the Executive, with 96% of contracts going to local companies. It is also important to reflect on the fact that the total value of that construction in the second quarter of this year was the lowest quarterly value in the past five years. The construction industry is engaging, and it has identified 16 Programme for Government commitments that it can assist the Executive in delivering. As some Members have said, we recognise — at least, we should recognise — the importance of investing in the sector, and we see its financial impact. Every pound invested in construction produces £2.84 in wider economic activity. We should not lose sight of that important aspect of our economy. However, we have to reflect on the fact that 25,000 jobs have been lost in construction and local industry output has dropped dramatically since 2007-08.

I want to make particular reference to last week's announcement and welcome the £200

million jobs initiative. The package that was outlined will deliver new measures to improve schools and roads and accelerate nearly £60 million of capital projects. We are told that more than £40 million of that will be available to deliver a range of projects to support the construction sector.

There is a list that includes improving the schools estate, further roads, structural maintenance and street lighting. There is £8 million for the housing co-ownership and maintenance budget. There is also an extra £5.7 million for the tourism development scheme, which we are told may support over 450 jobs in construction. However, to support the construction sector and the local economy, we must ensure that the proper procedures, processes and tools are in place. Although the inclusion of social clauses is important, a social clause cannot simply be defined as a 26-week Steps to Work programme. Therefore, the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) guidance must be maximised.

5.30 pm

Like other Members, I had the opportunity to meet subcontractors today. Part of our discussion was about ensuring collectively that the early pay programme, which has been mentioned in the debate, is extended to include subcontractors.

Mr Frew: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree that the onus has to be taken off subcontractors when they are in a position in which they have to complain about the lateness of payment to either the client or the Government? Does she agree with me that there has to be some way to get a resolution whereby the onus is taken off the subcontractor and the Government or the client can scrutinise how payments are meted out?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute added to her time.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member for that, and I agree. My previous comment was that this is about getting the tools, processes, policies and procedures in place to do just that: to simply protect the sector, not only at the top level but, clearly, at the subcontractor level. In reference to the Member's question, today, one contractor described quite brutally how he had received a phone call on a Friday about work that was due to start on the following Monday. In effect, the company was going into administration. We heard very human and tragic stories today. It is important to reflect on

the fact that, from my recollection, almost 80 companies have been affected. We are talking about a huge impact from job losses. Although the figure has been mentioned, I think that I need to repeat it: over 2,000 jobs have been lost in the sector.

Today, subcontractors' demands were clear: they need a rescue package. I suggest that the House and the Executive look collectively at how the announcements this week and in the past few days can support that. Subcontractors also request that the Assembly and Departments look at how to tackle clients to support them. We need to support subcontractors on the early pay scheme. It is important that we also reflect on changes to procurement. It is critical that the construction sector has a process whereby contractors are asked for more than five years' experience. Some previous guidance restricted those who could even apply, as, in the current economic climate, they had to show three years' experience. I welcome the changes that are tagged to that system. We must also ensure, however, that, if that simplified procurement process demands the lowest cost and prices, ethical, quality legal processes are in place.

Mr Speaker: The Member must draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I thank the Member who tabled the motion.

Mr D McIlveen: I, too, would like to join my friend and colleague Mr Frew in extending my sympathies to the Patton family and all the firm's workers for the difficulties in which they find themselves at present. Not only has the news this week been a huge blow to the Ballymena area but the ramifications of such announcements have a profound ripple effect. Many construction companies will say, "If that can happen to Patton, surely it can happen to other companies as well."

A number of points have already been raised about subcontractors. I, too, was privileged to attend the meeting today. The points have been well made. We in the Assembly must get to a position in which we are clear about the boundaries to what we can or cannot do. Previously, I made this same point on private sector issues, and I will make it again. I come from a private sector background and still own a business. I think that the one thing that private sector people find exceptionally frustrating is talk, and there is sometimes a lot of talk. Unless it is backed up with action, we can,

unfortunately, get ourselves into a position where talk can become cheap.

A lot of people out there, both inside and outside the political realm, have put forward motions or made suggestions on things that are not deliverable. We really have to be very careful that we do not add insult to injury by giving false hope to those in the private sector. So, I think that we have to deal very specifically with the things that we can deliver.

The Finance Committee has recently been discussing prompt payment, particularly where government contracts are concerned. There are issues to do with how quickly some Departments have been making payments. It is really important for contractors that they are paid quickly and efficiently. As has been mentioned, it is important for the subcontractors that the money trickles through and that everybody gets a fair bite of the cherry.

We have to look at what has been done already. As has been mentioned, an announcement was made last week about co-ownership housing. I come from a property business background, so I have a certain degree of understanding of what needs to be done there. We have to accept that it is a property market. Any market is driven by the principle that demand has to outweigh supply. At the moment, unfortunately, we are in a position where we have the opposite: we have an oversupply of property and a limited amount of demand. To increase that demand, we have to come from a number of angles. First, the banks have to be lending, and I think that the pressure on banks has to continue. The Minister, along with Arlene Foster, has been doing that, and I certainly want to see that continue. So, it is important that as much pressure is put on the banks as possible.

I want to tie in with what Mr Lunn said about the dysfunctional planning system that we have at the minute. I agree with him wholeheartedly. There is money for our private sector contractors waiting to be had.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. He referred to talk. The Planning Service would talk the economy to death. It has done so in some cases in our constituency. For example, the Runkerry decision was 10 years in the planning system. That is a shame and a disgrace. I doubt that any private sector company would want to come and use Northern Ireland as a base, given our Planning Service's atrocious record.

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

Mr D McIlveen: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree wholeheartedly. We have a disgraceful situation in North Antrim. We had the Minister of the Environment teeing off at the new Runkerry development one day and in court practically the next because of a judicial review that was taken by people using charitable donations in an attempt to keep the development from going ahead, after its being in the planning system for 10 years in the first place. That is morally and ethically wrong, and it has to be dealt with. I appeal to the Minister of the Environment to get a hold on the issue.

John Lewis was the other example. We have electrical contractors, construction engineers and architects on the starting blocks ready to go. Hundreds of thousands — millions — of pounds of investment that potentially would have come through the private sector has been completely missed, certainly in the short to medium term, as a result of the planning system. Those are things that we have control of. We do not have control over the market, but we have control over what happens in this place and how the Departments work. Therefore, I agree with the motion.

We will accept both the motion and the amendment. However, I urge the Minister to continue to work with his colleagues in the Executive to make sure that a cross-departmental approach is taken to this matter.

Mr Nesbitt: Like other Members, I express my sympathy and concern for Patton, the supply chain and the subcontractors and for the construction industry generally. It seems to be facing something of a perfect storm, with the public sector unable to spend enough, the banks clearly not lending enough and the householder perhaps not secure enough in their financial situation to be investing. It is, therefore, important to offer some form of hope or optimism and some positive ideas about a better future.

On that basis, I will address the part of our amendment that refers to a concessionary VAT rate for the repair, maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings. I acknowledge that my colleague for Strangford Mr Hamilton suggested a similar move for the hospitality industry. I think that that is at least as appropriate for the construction industry. I base that not just on my thoughts but on the evidence base of what has happened on the Isle of Man for some 12 years.

In January 2000, the Isle of Man Government, the Tynwald, secured from the European Union a concessionary 5% VAT rate, which has since become permanent, such was the success of the experiment 12 years ago. Should we be able to secure a concessionary 5% VAT rate, we would be able to achieve many things: retaining jobs and skills, possibly even generating new jobs; offering people an affordable way to improve their current dwelling; regenerating our existing housing stock; and even helping government to achieve its target of reducing carbon emissions and thus tackling global warming. I know that the Minister has been looking for the downside to the proposal, and I have identified that right away for him. Moreover, it would also reduce the viability of the black/shadow economy.

Again, I say all that because that is the experience of the Isle of Man Government. They commissioned an evaluation on 31 December 2006, and this was its primary conclusion:

"The overwhelming impression from all sectors of the Island community is that the experiment has been a huge success. Those offering this view include, the public, the trade, politicians and Government Departments and bodies. There is also hearsay evidence from the trade that those operating in the shadow economy are complaining about the measure."

That was supplemented by two sectoral surveys that identified an increase in business, a decline in the shadow economy and an increase in the number of employees in the sector. The research also identified that work was undertaken that would not otherwise have been done, that people were less inclined to request cash deals and that they were much happier to look on small construction operations as being competitive with some of the larger businesses. Indeed, it also found that the quality of those coming forward looking for training in the construction industry improved significantly. More than that, it led to a hike in tax take. In 2006, the island's then Department of Trade and Industry reported that the 5% VAT rate led to a rise, despite the 12.5% differential when compared with the tax rate of 17.5%, as it was before.

I will quote just one more report from the Isle of Man Treasury. It said:

"With regard to the numbers of traders in the relevant construction industry codes, this has steadily increased from 453 at the start of the experiment ... to 691 in January 2006".

That is a 52% increase in a couple of years. The number of traders who made use of the reduced rates steadily increased from 265 at the end of 2000 to 487 at the end of 2006.

Let me emphasise that this 5% concessionary rate would be for labour-intensive projects, not for your local DIY store. It is hard to quantify the potential, in discrete terms, were we to do it in this country. However, Experian, the business intelligence people, has identified that, UK-wide, the potential is absolutely enormous. Lowering the VAT rate could result in a loss to the Treasury of between £102 million and £508 million —

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

Mr Nesbitt: — but that would be more than balanced by a stimulus effect of £1.4 billion for the economy.

Mr Speaker: I call Barry McElduff. We are almost out of time, but if the Member can say what he needs to say in three minutes, I am happy enough to take his contribution.

5.45 pm

Mr McElduff: Thanks very much, a Cheann Comhairle. Again, I just want to commend the motion; very timely, and all of that. I agree absolutely with the call for the Executive and individual Departments to bring forward, where possible, capital and maintenance programmes. I do appreciate the attendance of Minister Wilson at the debate and his frequent engagement with the all-party group on construction.

I invite the Minister to reflect that investment in the construction industry is not a burden but should, rather, be regarded as a stimulus for the wider economy. It is a way of investing and not cutting our way out of recession. Those points are regularly made at the all-party group on construction.

There was great focus today on job retention as much as job creation, and rightly so. It is everyone's business. We could, for example, ask the Minister for Employment and Learning about retraining and improving the employability and skills of construction workers who are already unemployed.

Those are some general points but, to be specific, today's debate has taken on the character of a campaign to ensure that there is greater protection for subcontractors and

suppliers when a main contractor goes into administration. Specifically, I ask the Minister to address whether it is factual that in the rest of the island of Ireland there are better protection mechanisms in place for subcontractors and suppliers. We heard evidence of that. I also invite the Minister to detail what will take effect later this week in relation to the construction contracts legislation that was recently introduced. That is an attempt to make things better.

I commend my party colleague's initiative today. Daithí McKay, the Member for North Antrim, convened that meeting. Lots of Members participated in the exercise and at one point Paul Girvan, Danny Kinahan and myself were totting up the figures as they were coming in. It was rather overwhelming: the names of the companies, the number of jobs losses and the amount owed. There was a totting-up exercise that, I think, reached 2,000 job losses, perhaps, on the horizon.

I suppose the one good thing that came out of today, and I thought about this when the 80-plus subcontractors were here, is that at least there is somewhere for them to come in terms of this regional Assembly. At least, they were accessing the Assembly and people who may be able to help them in some way.

My final point in my limited three minutes is to ask whether the Minister of Finance and Personnel, in relation to the judicial review delaying action on the A5, is aware of any engagement with the construction sector about that current difficulty?

Mr Wilson: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I am glad that you cut the Member down to three minutes. I noticed that when he was cut down to three minutes, what was the first thing he sacrificed? His Irish language introduction. I am glad to see that Sinn Féin is now getting its Irish language into perspective. Do it again, Mr Speaker.

This has been a useful and timely debate. Today, the priority for the Assembly seems to be what we do for the construction industry. We really do need to have some joined-up thinking in this because a couple of weeks ago the priority was welfare reform and what we do for the less well off in society. At that stage, we were prepared to sacrifice nearly £220 million and 1,300 jobs in the Civil Service sector that services welfare payments in other parts of the United Kingdom. Before that, there was a different priority.

The point is that none of these things comes without a cost, and this Assembly has to make up its mind. What are the real priorities? If there are priorities, then there are other things that we cannot do. I do not want to go into a long list of things that are sitting in the pipeline but let me just mention one that the SDLP and Sinn Féin are tweaking each other's tails on: the whole issue of pension reform, which, in two years' time, if we do not make the right decisions now, will cost this Assembly £260 million.

That was a priority when they were lobbied about pension reform. There was a different priority when they were lobbied about welfare reform. There is another priority today when they are lobbied about the construction industry.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: Yes.

Mr Byrne: I appreciate that the Minister has addressed some issues, but when is he going to address the issue of the subcontractors' plight? When is he going to address the issue of the workers and the subcontractors of Patton? When is he going to issue the procurement process that he is in charge of?

Mr Wilson: It is a most important point that everything cannot be a priority for the Assembly. I wanted to put today's debate in context and then move on talk about the issues. I think that there were probably five issues that came forward today.

The first was that we could do more. Of course, there were some exaggerated claims; Mr Byrne started his speech by saying that there are very few capital works in the scheme. I remind the Assembly of what the Executive are doing — not were doing, but are doing. We have a capital spend this year of over £1 billion. Over the four years of the Budget, we have a capital spend of £5 billion. Five years ago, 40% of spend in the construction industry was accounted for by the public sector. Today, as a result of the spending by the Executive, 64% is provided by the public sector.

The crisis is not a result of things that the Executive are not doing; it is, essentially, a problem that rests with the private sector and the collapse of spending therein. The public sector has filled the gap. Furthermore —

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: No, I will not give way. The Member had plenty of time to make his points.

Furthermore, not only have we, in our core Budget, put down substantial spending; in every monitoring round, we have given substantial amounts of money when they have been redirected by underspends in Departments.

The first port of call has been about what we can do to increase capital spending in Northern Ireland. Last year, in 2011-12, an additional £26 million, on top of the money that was being spent, went into capital spending. That meant that, in the first year of the Budget — 2011-12 — over £100 million went into roads maintenance spending.

I listen to the industry. It said look, that is fine, but a lot of it comes at the end of the year; it is a peak; it does not carry the industry through the year. This year, when money became available in the first round of monitoring in June, we immediately put additional money into the capital spending for DRD roads. This year, to date, we have put £49.8 million additional money into capital spending in maintenance alone. Of course, as Members have rightly pointed out, that benefits small businesses. In Northern Ireland, 96% of centres of procurement expertise (COPE) construction spend goes to locally owned firms. Although we cannot skew procurement, we have worked with the industry to try to direct procurement so that it encapsulates small firms in Northern Ireland. That is what we are doing.

If Members wish to have more money put into construction works, the first thing that we have to do is ask where that construction will sit in the Programme for Government. Secondly, what parts of our current spending do we sacrifice to do that? Thirdly, if we are going to do that, how can we ensure that it is going to have overall benefit for the Northern Ireland economy, when, of course, there are all the other competing interests?

Very often — I think it was repeated today — people give the multiplier that every £1 spent on the construction industry generates £2.64 of spending. That is right. A small proportion of that, about 40%, goes on wages. If we are talking about employment — I will just throw this out as an example — and if we take that out of spend on the number of people who are employed in the public sector, every £1 that is spent on employment in the public sector goes on wages. Immediately, you have to ask where the priorities lie.

The second thing that was said today was that we could do things differently and that there are other ways of getting money into the economy and the construction industry. Most of those, of course, involve private finance. I have had long discussions with the construction industry about private finance. In fact, when I first took over as Finance Minister, I sat down with the then head of the CEF, John Armstrong. He talked about innovative finance and new ways of bringing in money and everything else and about bringing forward proposals.

Three years later, the proposals have still not come forward. I do not necessarily fault people for that, but one of the things we have to say about it is that, in the current environment, it is difficult for the construction industry to draw down money from private financiers for construction projects. The financiers have been bitten by the construction industry and are reluctant to lend. If they do lend, they do so at very costly rates of interest, and, of course, if that is the case, we have to look at the costs of the projects and whether they give value for money.

Some Members mentioned the infrastructure guarantee fund, and I have had discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury about that. The Government have now introduced that fund. Under that fund, there are very strict criteria that, unfortunately, make it difficult for us in Northern Ireland to benefit. I had a long discussion with the Chief Secretary about this. The conditions are that projects have to be of national significance and shovel-ready, and they have to have already been turned down by the banks. I suppose that we have very few projects that could be called of national significance.

One of the breakthroughs that I made with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury when I spoke to him last week was that he accepted that it probably is difficult to meet those criteria in regions like Northern Ireland. He indicated that the door of the Treasury would be open to perhaps look at projects that may not necessarily meet that criteria but that are, nevertheless, important to the region. We will pursue that with him. I want to explore every possible avenue.

Another avenue that we are looking at is the whole idea of revenue finance initiatives. I think that it was Mrs Overend who talked about the possibility of £1.4 billion worth of schemes, although not until the next Budget period, and she queried why that could not happen until the next Budget period. The reason, of course, is that, for every £100 million of that, we would

have to take £10 million out of current revenue spending every year. In turn, that would mean a substantial rejigging of our immediate Budget.

We do not know what the resource budget is likely to be after the current spending period. All the indications that we have been given are that it will be hit fairly severely, with a 4% reduction in the year after the current comprehensive spending review (CSR) period ends, and a 2.7% reduction in the year after that. Until we know what revenue funding will be available to the Executive, it is difficult to make those commitments.

Nevertheless, we are prepared, we are exploring and we are already looking at trying to have projects ready. It will be a decision for the Executive, but do not forget that that decision will be against the background of substantial cuts in revenue spending in the next Budget period, financing, if we can get it, the devolution of corporation tax, and a range of other things that we are already making commitments to.

So, it is not an easy option, but it is one for which preparations are already being made, and she acknowledged that it is being looked at in the investment strategy.

6.00 pm

Mr Flanagan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I want to make one last point. The Department for Regional Development could look at private finance, because toll roads and suchlike are a ready source of quick revenue that would lead to infrastructure development. It will be interesting to see whether the Ulster Unionist Minister, in response to his party's amendment, is prepared to consider some of those things. Do not forget that costs are attached to all private finance initiatives. The initiative may be to mutualise the Housing Executive's stock, but where does the money to support the capital spend there come from? It comes from rents, and we then have the conflict of whether to put up rents to get extra capital to build more houses or keep rents the same and deny ourselves the ability to raise the money.

It is the same with water. We could get more money to improve the water infrastructure, but is the Assembly prepared to consider imposing water charges to raise the required capital expenditure? Those are the difficult decisions that we must make. Let us not run away from them and the things that we have to do.

A Member wanted me to give way, although I cannot remember who it was.

Mr Flanagan: Thanks, Minister. I know that you are almost out of time, so I will be brief. The Minister laboured extensively on the benefits of PPPs and PFIs, matters that have been missing from the debate. Surely he agrees that instead of signing up to a huge number of PPPs and PFIs, the Executive would be much better securing borrowing powers and enabling agencies such as the Housing Executive to borrow money that they could decide how to spend to secure the best possible value for taxpayers and ratepayers.

Mr Wilson: The Member may not be aware that when we borrow, we first have to service the cost of that borrowing and, secondly, pay back the borrowing. Where do we raise the revenue for that? I have been explaining some of those ways and some of the decisions that we may have to make if we want to raise the revenue to service that borrowing and pay it back in the longer run.

Let me come to one last but important point: subcontractors. We can do things in the public sector for subcontractors. The fair payment proposals that I brought to the Assembly, and which led to the Construction Contracts (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, come into effect on Wednesday.

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

Mr Wilson: Let me make it quite clear that that will require penalties to be imposed on main contractors who do not honour the requirements in public sector contracts, to the point that we will exclude them from tendering for public sector contracts. That is the only way to try to get fair payments. The industry should put its own house in order, but we will seek to ensure that there is at least an incentive for it to do that, so that subcontractors are not left in the position that the Member and others described.

Mr B McCrea: At the heart of our amendment is the need to do something now. The crisis facing the construction industry has been with us for some time. People have done their best, but they now have to stare reality in the face.

In concluding, the Minister, who does not normally take kindly to my supporting his points, raised the question of borrowing money. It may have escaped people's notice, but we in the United Kingdom spend more money on servicing our debt interest than we do on our

entire education budget. Our deficit is still going up. We will still have to find ways to find money. The Minister asked the question: where are we going to find the money to do more? Will we take it from somewhere else or find innovative ways to deal with things?

There are also issues for which we must take responsibility. I was at another meeting, so I did not hear Mr Lunn's contribution on planning. However, because I have heard him previously, I am quite sure that he talked about John Lewis and judicial reviews. Is there no way that we, as a legislative body, can find a way to reduce the time that it takes for a judicial review. It seems that we are at the mercy of these processes. We are all told that we cannot do it, even if it is a case of putting funds into a different body that is no longer a public body so that we can move things on. It just seems outrageous that we cannot build what people want, whether that is the John Lewis store, the A5 or a plethora of other projects. That is not to say that people do not have the right to stand up for their interests, but we should surely be able to go through that process in a timely manner so that we can get a resolution to these issues.

People criticise the banks. You have to realise that, if we place more regulation on the banks, and people call for that because of their profligate lending, their capital ratios will dictate that they have less money to lend. So you have to work out what it is that you want: more lending or more regulation? Somewhere along the line, we have to find a balance that encourages people to put money into our economy.

Our amendment particularly calls for more public-private financing. Normally, the minute you mention that, everybody says, "No, under no circumstances can we do that. Never will we do it." The issue is that you cannot raise money any other way. You will have to take a position on whether to do without roads and schools or find some way of financing other initiatives. The Minister did not talk about public-private financing — perhaps it was not brought up — but maybe he will at some stage.

I am interested in what happens in the Scottish Futures Trust, which looks at supposedly innovative ways of financing projects. It trumpets on its website that it is able to build an additional 12 schools. It mentions a scheme called tax incremental financing (TIF), which borrows against future tax incomes. All of that is against a backdrop of it saying that there will be a reduction in the amount of money available. We have not seen the worst of it yet.

We will see more and more reductions in our public sector finance. Perhaps there is a way of looking at non-profit distributing, a national housing trust or maybe we have to look at toll roads. Maybe we have to put that on the agenda. Perhaps we even have to consider whether we are raising the right amount of tax in areas where we can raise tax.

Those of you who call all the time for tax-varying powers have them in your gift — they are called water rates. You could say to people that we want to borrow to invest. That is an argument that you will have to have with the general public. The real issue is this: when I heard the Minister's statement earlier — I know that he was doing his best — he made the point that the A5 will cost us £10 million for every month that it is delayed. I wonder whether we are able to put that money into really profitable, useful projects. I heard Mervyn Storey say that he knows of projects that are shovel-ready, but we do not appear to be able to get that money on the ground when we need it.

I will conclude by saying that —

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

Mr B McCrea: — in education, instead of paying the £75 million in revenue, maybe we should be spending it on capital projects. The real issue is that we need to come forward with a constructive, proper way to get the construction sector out of the mess that it is in now.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you to all Members who contributed to the debate.

Before I move on to the substance of those comments, many Members will know that the industry now requires stability. Stability is required within the industry, and it must also be reflected outward, because the rumour mill currently at work will lead to only one thing — the paralysis of activity. That is uppermost. We have heard a wide-ranging debate on a multiplicity of things: some were focused, some maybe not so focused. The key message that must come from the Assembly, and, indeed, the Executive, to the sector and, in particular, to the construction industry is that it needs stability.

I will make some concluding remarks later. As we ranged through the debate, Mr Byrne referred to the difficulties that small contractors face through being far down the list of creditors. He also mentioned social housing newbuilds.

Just today, I received an e-mail from someone who was involved in a social housing newbuild project and, as a consequence of being so far down that list, was not paid. That issue must be watched very carefully. So the use of public funds and the consequences of that must be very carefully scrutinised, albeit in that case by an arm's-length body. However, there was an injection of significant funds to that project.

Mr Byrne also mentioned the banks. We have the funding for lending scheme, and although I appreciate that it is not specifically directed at the construction industry, the exertion of pressure on and encouragement of the likes of Ulster Bank, which operates the scheme, and expansion in key areas, will have a consequence for the construction sector.

Mrs Overend talked about the significant decline in the industry and alternative sources of funding. She also mentioned a reduction in the VAT rate, to which her party leader referred as well.

At the SDLP's annual conference at the weekend the shadow Secretary of State, Mr Vernon Coaker, talked specifically about those matters as being key priorities for any incoming Labour Government. In many instances, the sooner those are implemented, the better to give a shot in the arm to our construction industry.

Mr Girvan talked about the lowering of property rates and the difficulty that, while at one level that should be an opportunity, given the access to finance and the inability to raise finance from the banks, acquisition is a major issue.

Mr McKay mentioned the meeting that took place with the subcontractors earlier today, and I thank him for facilitating it. There, we heard about the coalface of the matter. Despite the fact that there were many in that room, at least a thousand more could have been there who have been affected by the ripple effect of the Patton situation.

Mr Lunn also talked about VAT reduction for maintenance on house extensions. Mr Frew talked about the subbies and his own experience in that regard.

He also mentioned the improvements in the payment processing performance of Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments. Some of those have definitely improved. I see that the Department of Finance and Personnel's performance rate of paying invoices within 30 working days stands at 98%, which is an excellent figure. Some of the other

Departments' payment performance rates are not as high. The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has a 92% rate; the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's rate is 95%; the Department of the Environment's (DOE) rate is 96%; and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) rate is 95%. That begs the question as to why they are not as close to 100% within 30 working days as they should be.

Maeve McLaughlin talked about the people who are employed in the construction industry and reflected the issues around payments that were raised at today's meeting with the subcontractors.

Likewise, David McIlveen mentioned the prompt payment of contractors and subcontractors and the fairness and efficiency that is required in the delivery of that. He also talked about housing co-ownership and about lending from the banks, a theme that emerged again and again.

In an intervention, Mr Storey referred to delays in the planning system in relation to Runkerry in North Antrim. I would point out that for four of those eight years his party colleague was the Minister. I am glad that it was my colleague who took the decision.

Mr Nesbitt talked about security of funding and raised the issue of VAT. He mentioned the Isle of Man, which has a concessionary 5% VAT rate. That would be very attractive.

Barry McElduff spoke about the meeting that took place earlier today. Minister Wilson discussed a wide range of issues, including welfare reform, sources of fundraising, capital spending and the centres of procurement expertise.

That brings me to the key themes of our motion. Earlier, I talked about the stability and the confidence that is required in the wider economy, but also in the building and construction sector. The Minister of Finance and Personnel, correctly, spoke about the reliance of the building and construction industry on the public sector, which provides about 60% of its income.

However, we require public expenditure to be deployed effectively and efficiently. Newbuild programmes, be they for the Department of Education or any other Department, must not be held up by red tape. Where projects are good to go and ready for movement, we should not have internal red tape. I have experienced

some of it at the Department of Education, where that has been the case.

6.15 pm

That brings us to the idea that prevention is better than cure. The Minister and his officials have been helpful with this. We heard about the financial mess and the human misery that people are going through as a consequence of one firm going into administration, and to ensure that we avoid that, we need the likes of project bank accounts and targets to be set for those accounts. We also need public sector moneys for the supply chain to be paid into those accounts so that they can be ring-fenced by a trust. The UK Government aim to have project bank accounts for £4 billion of government works by the end of 2014. We need those in place as soon as possible.

Likewise, all public sector procurers must give serious consideration to the capitalisation of lead contractors as a pre-qualification requirement. That takes us back to COPES. We cannot have a situation in which a firm goes into administration one month, and, a month or six weeks later, it is reformed as a new firm and is competing and tendering for public moneys with no financial history to show its stability and, on the face of it, no experience to show its ability to deliver projects that are paid for out of the public purse. That is a major issue.

The Minister referred to how some companies will be penalised. I would like to know that we will not have people, who could be penalised, going bust over there, taking down a whole pile of subcontractors and suppliers over there, and then reforming as another company over here and being treated as a new entity straightaway.

Mr Wilson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: I will give way to the Minister.

Mr Wilson: The Member brought a very poignant case of someone in such a situation to me recently, and I undertook to look at it. Indeed, proposals on the issue will be going to the procurement board very soon. I appreciate that he first drew it to my attention. The industry will have to learn that there will be penalties if they try to play that game.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much for that, Minister. I appreciate you giving your time to this issue, as you said previously that you would follow through on it.

All that adds to the confidence that is so necessary when one contractor looks to another and a supplier looks to a contractor and thinks: does that person have the capacity to pay me? That is what we saw in the Long Gallery today. Where that happens is not a place where we want to be as an economy.

The final element is the need for innovative and creative thinking for schemes to create new jobs. We need knowledge and information on a joined-up, cross-departmental basis, including in local government, to help firms to develop and expand with resources and information about funding. Just today, I chaired a conference upstairs in the Long Gallery, where a key speaker said that, in accessing resources and funding, we are "not at the races". I am talking about EU funding and other sources of funding that can help businesses to develop their research and development and innovation.

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

Mr McGlone: With those key elements in place, we will be able to see expansion and wealth creation in the local economy and the jobs in our construction sector that are so needed.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the current plight of the construction industry; and calls on the Executive to prioritise the proposed maintenance and capital spending plans of each Department, to encourage and facilitate more investment in public-private infrastructure projects during this Assembly mandate and to lobby Her Majesty's Treasury for a reduced rate of VAT for the repair, maintenance and improvement of existing dwellings to stimulate the local economy and support jobs within the construction industry.

Diabetes Strategy

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. The Minister will have only 10 minutes to respond to the debate on this occasion.

Mr P Ramsey: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the increase in the number of people diagnosed with type 1 and type 2 diabetes; further notes the specific increase in type 1 diabetes amongst children; acknowledges the cost to the health service of managing diabetes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce urgently a properly resourced diabetes strategy.

Mr Speaker, I thank you, the Business Office staff and the Business Committee for facilitating this debate. I was running around like crazy last Tuesday trying to get this motion on the Order Paper. I thank Members from all parties for their co-operation.

It is important that we are discussing this issue, given that it is World Diabetes Day on Wednesday. Most Parliaments, particularly those on these islands, will be either having a debate on diabetes or hosting an event. On Wednesday, there will be an event hosted by the all-party group on diabetes, which will involve a number of parents and children from across Northern Ireland. Some of the children will be giving testimony on the difficulties that they have experienced because of diabetes.

I declare an interest as an insulin-dependent diabetic and chair of the all-party group on diabetes. I acknowledge the sterling work of Diabetes UK, which has supported our group and helped to inform Members, not just those on the all-party group but the whole House, about the impact of diabetes through its programmes over the past number of years.

I refer to the report 'Diabetes in Northern Ireland: The human, social and economic challenge', which was published by C3 Collaborating for Health, Novo Nordisk and Diabetes UK last year. There has been a 33% rise in the number of people diagnosed with diabetes here in the past five years — the highest rate of any region in Britain — from just under 57,000 in 2007 to just under 76,000 this year. That is a most worrying statistic, which is

compounded further when we delve into the numbers provided by Diabetes UK.

Take, for example, our constituency of Foyle, Mr Speaker. Over the past five years, over 1,100 more people have been diagnosed with diabetes. That is higher than the regional average. The number of people in this region with diabetes has rocketed by 41% between 2005 and 2011. That is bound to put massive pressures on the health system, on public expenditure and on families. I welcome the Minister to the debate.

The motion refers to a specific increase in type 1 diabetes among our young people. Other Members may give testimony about their own family and the difficulties that they have experienced. There are over 1,000 under-16s who have type 1 diabetes. That may sound like an insignificant figure, but the impact of long-term care, cost and possible complications, as well as the legacy of that figure, cannot be ignored by the House. Approximately 85% of diabetes cases in Northern Ireland are type 2. A massive 80% of those could have been prevented by lifestyle changes.

The focus of any resourced diabetes strategy must balance treatment and clear preventative measures. In the decade between 2000 and 2010, the number of diabetes-related deaths rose by an awful 128%. That is a frightening number, and I want to put it in context. If 50 Members had died from diabetes in the previous decade, every Member in the following decade when the massive increase took place would, statistically, be dead.

The cost to the economy must be emphasised. Diabetes is costing the Executive £1 million a day, every single day of the year. That, coupled with lost working time and early deaths is hard to quantify or qualify in both social and economic terms.

I fully support the report that I mentioned earlier, particularly the aspects of it that deal with young people. The report states:

"Ideally, good diabetes care in the future should...acknowledge that children and young people with diabetes have particular difficulties in relation to self-management in schools. Transition from paediatric to adult diabetes services is a critical time, when many young people with diabetes allow their care to lapse".

We know many of those young people, and I have spoken to consultants in Altnagelvin who refer that issue to me. As we know, and, as the

report says, that has potentially disastrous results. Some of it has to do with diet control. They stop taking their insulin, for example. The report continues:

"It is vital for young people with diabetes to keep good control, with the support of the paediatric and adult multidisciplinary teams, as they have the greatest number of years ahead of them."

We all know that.

As part of the report's goals, we, as elected representatives, are urged to use the opportunity of 2012 to review, strengthen and maintain the commitments already in the CREST/Diabetes UK guidelines, meeting the special needs of children with diabetes to improve self-management support skills in families and schools. Will the Minister comment specifically on that subject and give us an idea about what collaboration has taken place with the Minister of Education on access to schools and schoolchildren as regards awareness?

I want to make one point to the Minister about a properly resourced diabetes strategy. We are here today to ensure that we are looking at that. I will give him one example. Recently, I was told by a constituent who has a family history of diabetes that, every six months, he used to call into the local pharmacy to get his blood and glucose tested. He has recently gone back to the same pharmacy to find out that it is no longer able to carry out those checks because the funding has stopped. Earlier, I made a point about the importance of preventative measures, and people do call in off the streets to pharmacists to get a blood test. Maybe the Minister may use this occasion to respond to that.

In balancing preventative measures and treatment, we must ensure that local services are accessible to people who may want to get checked, get advice and access services. GPs and diabetic nurses have an ever-increasing workload, and it is our job to complement their work to ensure that they have the resources and guidance they need to ensure that, as a public health issue, diabetes receives proper due care and attention.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has mentioned many figures on diabetes. Does he agree that the report states that up to 10,000 people in Northern Ireland could be living with diabetes who do not know it?

Mr P Ramsey: Yes, and that is the point of ensuring that, in future, pharmacies that take on the aspects of accessibility for people coming in off the street continues. The most important aspect of diabetes is to ensure that we are carrying out education and awareness programmes in the community, not in hospitals or in GP practices. I know that time is limited in the debate, and I urge all Members to support the motion.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. At the outset, I apologise that I might have to leave before the debate ends. It is important to commend the Members who signed the all-party motion. Given that we have a number of all-party groups, it is important that we see an outcome of some of the work that takes place in them. It is a collaboration. Pat, you mentioned collaboration between charities, the community and voluntary sector and MLAs. We want a genuine partnership approach, and debates such as this are quite useful.

It is important to recognise that the Minister is also here during the debate.

6.30 pm

As Chair of the Committee, I think it is important that I update you on what we have done. I know that some members of the Committee are also members of the all-party group, but it is important to put on record what we have done. Recently, we considered the issue of the support provided to children with diabetes who require medication at school. In your opening remarks, Pat, you mentioned that. In particular, we looked at the role of diabetic support nurses. We wrote to the Minister in September to ask about the current provision of diabetic support nurses and for an update on the Department's position on the administration of medication in schools. In and around that time, there were media stories around pupils starting the new school term. The Minister replied, stating that training for teachers and school staff is provided by a diabetic support nurse, alongside the parent and the pupil. It can only be done during school term, to accommodate the teaching staff, and five sessions are required. Obviously, there is a need for good communication among all those involved, so that we do not end up with a situation where a child is unable to start a new school term or indeed a new school because the teacher has not been trained in how to administer the medication. We also need to be careful about the transition between primary and secondary

school. It is hard enough, as a young person, going from primary school into secondary school without probably missing some time at the secondary school because there has been a failure to put that into practice. The Minister also stated that the health authorities were working with the education and library boards to look at the whole area of training. Such co-operation is to be welcomed.

I will not speak on behalf of the Minister; he is here to do that for himself. However, I think it important that I highlight the work that the Committee has done, because the issue was raised with us through some of the Committee members who sit on the all-party group. Also, people feel that they can write to us to get information or answers to questions.

There are currently 16·8 whole-time-equivalent paediatric diabetic support nurses across the five trusts. Funding has been approved for a further two posts. That is to be welcomed, because the Belfast and South Eastern trusts currently appear to be understaffed in that regard.

The proposer of the motion highlighted the statistics around diabetes, whether type 1 and type 2, and the work that needs to be done not only in dealing with the two types of diabetes but in prevention. It is a growing health issue for our society. We need to look at a strategy for dealing with the condition, and, as I say, we need to look at prevention. But this is also about people taking ownership and helping people to change behaviours and risk factors that may mean that they develop diabetes in later life. We could talk all day about fizzy drinks and things like that; however, there is an onus on the individual, manufacturers and advertisers and all of that stuff to ensure that people are aware of the health benefits or risks for later life. The Health Committee is currently focusing on health inequalities and health promotion, and this is another area where we need to do more work on prevention, public awareness and early intervention.

I do not sit on the all-party group, but, once again, I commend it for the work that it has done. I thought it important that, as Chair of the Committee, I should highlight some of the stuff that we have done. I support the motion.

Mr Buchanan: I count it a privilege to speak on this important health-related topic, one that I know unites all parties in the Chamber.

Diabetes is an extremely complex disease that can affect people in different ways. If it is not properly managed and treated, it will certainly

lead to serious complications such as heart disease, stroke, blindness, amputation of limbs and kidney failure. Diabetes has long been a common problem in Northern Ireland, and most of us in the House will know of someone, including family members and friends, who is affected by it. The number of adults with diabetes aged 17 and over who are registered with their GP now stands at 75,837. That represents an increase of 33% since 2007 and an increase of almost 19,000 sufferers. The number of children and young people under 17 who have the disease is around 1,000, which is far too high. Although I accept that diabetes is a growing worldwide problem, an increase of 33% in Northern Ireland does not compare favourably with a rise of 25% in England, 20% in Wales and 18% in Scotland. Describing the trend in Northern Ireland as very worrying, Mr Iain Foster, the national director of Diabetes UK Northern Ireland said:

"Diabetes is a rising challenge within our health service and it is vital that an effective strategy is put in place to ensure we do not see a similar increase in the next five years."

He also stated that 10% of our health service budget was spent on diabetes, and he rightly stresses that that is not sustainable.

My colleague the Health Minister faces many legitimate and compelling demands on his limited resources, and today's motion is not a demand for him to simply throw more money at the problem — far from it. We need to approach the issue strategically. We must look at ways of maximising our resources and tackling diabetes without spending unduly large sums of money. If we get the strategy right, there is no doubt that it will make a lot of difference to people who suffer from diabetes and we will make much progress.

As the motion highlights, there are two distinct types of diabetes, both of which are on the increase. From conversations with GPs, I feel that, overall, our strategy for tackling type 1 is better than our strategy for tackling type 2. In type 1, the person's body destroys the insulin-producing beta cells in the pancreas. Type 1 usually appears in young people and, therefore, is commonly known as juvenile diabetes or childhood diabetes. Unlike type 2, type 1 is not preventable and cannot be linked in any way with a person's lifestyle. Whether a person is heavy or thin or fit or unfit makes absolutely no difference to their risk of developing type 1 diabetes. Therefore, early intervention is so important, as it can prevent further and more serious problems at a later stage, particularly in relation to eyesight and the feet. It can also

reduce the likelihood of greater costs to the system at a later stage if a person's condition is controlled and not allowed to deteriorate. Although current arrangements seem to deliver a fairly well co-ordinated response in type 1 cases, there is always much room for improvement.

Type 2 diabetes is much more complex, both in its causes and its treatment. GPs tell us that it can be more difficult for them to refer patients with type 2 to the specialists that they need to see. Type 2 diabetes is often linked to a range of lifestyle factors. Mr Iain Foster said that modern life, our food industry and a lack of physical activity are contributing to the rise in diabetes. That is a key statement because it underlines the need for a much broader strategy than one that is purely the responsibility of the Health Minister and his officials. We must ensure that sufferers are encouraged to maintain a healthy weight by taking regular physical activity and having a balanced diet that is rich in fruit and vegetables but low in fat, sugar and salt.

Education and awareness are key. I commend the sterling work of organisations such as Diabetes UK Northern Ireland, which holds roadshows and other events to increase awareness and to offer help and advice. Coming from west Tyrone, I know that the diabetes education and support programme —

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

Mr Buchanan: — called CHOICE, has provided a successful service for children and young people who have diabetes in the Western Health and Social Care Trust area. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Beggs: I, too, declare an interest: some of my family members have type 2 diabetes. I welcome the motion as it will increase awareness of the disease. I hope that it will make people more aware of some of the preventative actions they can take to reduce the risk of acquiring type 2 diabetes. I accept that, on some occasions, type 1 cannot be changed by diet etc, but, for others, it is possible to change. In addition, it is clear that there is a need for early intervention and improved management of the condition to minimise the wide range of associated complications that can arise.

As was said earlier, a 41% increase in the number of diabetics over the past six years is quite stark. Of even more concern is the fact

that a further 30% rise is expected by 2020. Mr Foster of Diabetes UK Northern Ireland identifies the main contributing factors as obesity, population growth and ageing. I believe that a diabetes epidemic is an appropriate description of what we face today. Mr Foster also highlights the fact that 80% of people with type 2 diabetes are overweight or obese and 80% of the cases of the disease could be delayed or prevented if we ate a healthy diet and exercised regularly. Linda Nazarko of the British Journal on Healthcare Assistants indicated that not drinking to excess and not smoking, as well as eating a healthy diet that is high in fibre with not too much sugar, will help to prevent diabetes.

According to Diabetes UK, the National Health Service spends a staggering 10% of its budget on diabetes care. The statistics are stark. We are advised that one in five UK hospital admissions for coronary heart disease, renal disease and foot ulcers is related to diabetes. Adults with diabetes are two to four times more likely to die from heart disease or a stroke. Diabetes is also the single biggest cause of blindness, and 30% of diabetics develop kidney disease. The statistics also tell us that one in 14 of people with diabetes has a foot ulcer, one in 10 of which results in amputation. One limb is lost to the disease each week in Northern Ireland. That must be a wake-up call for all of us to adopt a better lifestyle and diet and to exercise more.

Although type 1 diabetes is not preventable for some, the majority of childhood diabetes can be prevented through the proper management of lifestyle. A big responsibility falls on parents to give guidance in that regard and to set an example. We must also ensure that the education of young people who develop type 1 diabetes is not limited by restrictions on the administration of their medication.

I welcome the call to the Minister in the motion to produce a properly resourced diabetes strategy, an integral part of which must be early years development for all. Good habits for life are most easily learned early in life, and I encourage the Minister to walk alongside other Departments to ensure that adequate education and prevention of the condition occurs. I declare an interest as a member of Horizon Sure Start.

As well as the high cost of diabetes to personal health, the cost to the economy is huge. It is estimated that it costs £1 million a day to treat diabetes in Northern Ireland alone, but there is also the loss of earnings and income that results in individual families, as people may not

be able to be as productive as they would otherwise be.

Progress has been made with a diabetes framework in Northern Ireland, but it is not enough, and more must be done. People are two and a half times more likely to become diabetic at any age if they come from an area of multiple deprivation, as other Members stated. So a targeted approach is also necessary in order to work with communities in deprived areas so that the health of individuals can be better protected and the knowledge, education and dangers can be highlighted to them. The strategy must be one of prevention, especially for children, and that must be effectively communicated in such areas. Good access to local GP-led health and care centres and local diabetes clinics has to be a target, because sometimes the inability to access such good advice easily restricts the level of care.

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

Mr Beggs: We must also ensure that there are appropriate referral pathways to consultants when assistance is necessary.

6.45 pm

Mr Dickson: As the vice-chair of the all-party group on diabetes, I support the motion. I declare an interest, as my wife is a type 2 diabetic. Therefore, from a family perspective, I know what it is like to live with the issue.

Mr Ramsey quoted quite a number of statistics, as have others. I do not want to repeat many of those statistics, but I express my concern at the numbers being diagnosed in Northern Ireland, particularly children. As we face budgetary constraints and as the Minister has to tackle the budget, the cost of dealing with diabetes and its complications puts a huge strain on our health service. I think, Minister, that that has to be acknowledged today.

The most important effects are on the everyday life of individuals and their families as they adjust to managing the condition. It is our duty as Members of the Assembly to do all that we can to mitigate the difficulties faced by those affected, and so I turn to a proposed strategy. In the management of diabetes, we must ensure that patients have ready access to treatment that is as locally based as possible. Currently, diabetic care is managed quite well in the community, but a great deal more could be done. However, as the Chair of the all-party group said, cuts are now being felt in service

delivery. People with diabetes still incur significant costs in travelling to medical appointments and missing work. Therefore, we should provide as much support as we can in that regard.

We must ensure that there is support not just for the individual but for the whole family affected by diabetes. The family unit can act as an effective tool in the management of diabetes by creating an environment in which healthy eating and regular exercise are endorsed and promoted by the whole family. Such support is vital for those trying to manage their condition and has the added effect of an entire family learning good dietary habits. We need to press for more resources and better education for healthcare professionals who have to cope with the increased number of children with diabetes. We need to press also for greater provision for the children affected.

Another important point is that the vast majority of cases of diabetes in Northern Ireland are type 2, most of which, as Mr Ramsey and others said, could be prevented by lifestyle changes. The NHS states that a 5% reduction in body weight, combined with more regular exercise, can reduce the risk of getting type 2 diabetes by more than 50%. I will take that lesson on board as well. The UK as a whole is now the most overweight country in Europe. The number of obese adults is forecast to rise by 73% over the next 20 years, potentially resulting in more than one million extra cases of type 2 diabetes, with the consequent heart disease and cancers. In Northern Ireland, 59% of adults are overweight or obese, and, disturbingly, 8% of children aged two to 15 were assessed as being obese. We face enormous challenges, including the challenge to put in place more effective preventative measures, which cannot be tackled by just one Department.

That brings me to the main point that I would like to make. Although the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety should take the lead, any diabetes strategy must be cross-departmental in nature. Undoubtedly, there will have to be links with other initiatives in the Department, such as the 10-year framework for tackling obesity, which was launched earlier this year. There must also be co-operation across Departments to achieve the best results. A diabetes strategy would have to work with DCAL and its representatives to get more people involved in physical activity through the existing sport and physical recreation strategies. It would have to work with DRD as it promotes active travel. Indeed, much of the focus of the proposed active travel

strategy is on the health benefits of more walking and cycling, which are directly related to tackling obesity as a major cause of diabetes. The strategy will have to work with the Department of Education to ensure that children grow up with an awareness of diabetes and the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise. Diabetes is a cross-cutting issue. As we look forward, let us think cross-departmentally for the benefit of all who are affected.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate on an important issue for a growing number of people across Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, diabetes continues to be a major problem affecting many lives in our communities. A recent survey showed a 33% increase in the past few years in the number of people in my constituency living with type 1 or type 2 diabetes, which is certainly of some concern. The fact that there are now almost 20,000 more sufferers than in 2007 shows that there is room for improvement in tackling the rising problem. It is now estimated that more than one in 20 people in the UK has diabetes.

I know that the Minister is aware of the challenges that we face because of diabetes. He is looking at ways of improving lifestyle choices and at healthier living, focusing particularly on healthier foods, encouraging a more balanced diet and the importance of regular exercise. Prevention is better than cure. Therefore, it is imperative that work continue to place a greater emphasis on healthier lifestyles for young and old. As with other important issues in health, increasing public awareness through education will not only help to tackle diabetes but have a positive knock-on effect on obesity levels, heart disease and some forms of cancer.

Measures such as A Fitter Future For All are to be welcomed as a practical, targeted way of helping to improve the health of our population. There is a role for all levels of service in helping to tackle the growing problem of diabetes. Central to that must be through our GP surgeries and other community-based outlets. The Transforming Your Care programme will help to address that important issue.

Screening programmes have proved successful in highlighting risk and making people aware of the real dangers that they could find themselves in. The right structures must be put in place to facilitate early detection and intervention, which is crucial to minimising the impact of diabetes on lives. Given the seriousness of the issue, it is vital that we do not get complacent as we try to solve the problem.

Another important issue that often arises and did so recently in my constituency is having school staff properly trained and equipped to support young people with diabetic needs. Josh Todd, a young lad from north Down, has been involved in an ongoing case with the authorities to ensure that teachers and assistants are properly trained to enable him to get the education that he deserves. The start to Josh's education at a Bangor primary school was delayed because the staff had not received the necessary training from the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust to enable them to check the pupil's blood sugar levels and administer insulin if necessary. The education boards and local health trusts must work closely together to avoid pupils having to delay their school admission. There are clear discrepancies in the length of time it takes education boards across the country to carry out the statutory assessment of special educational needs. The South Eastern Education and Library Board has an average of 10 weeks, while the Western Education and Library Board has an average of six.

I commend Diabetes UK on its ongoing work to tackle diabetes. I trust that this debate will help to increase awareness of diabetes and to improve the lives of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton: I declare an interest as my father is a diabetic, so there is a family history there.

Diabetes has the potential to cost our society not just in money terms but in its general health and well-being. Without a healthy society, the ability of Northern Ireland to produce a well-balanced and well-resourced workforce is severely hindered. In 2011, the overall spend by the health service right across the UK for the care of diabetes and the complications that arise as a result of having the condition was well over £9 billion, with 79% of that figure used to treat the complications. In Northern Ireland, the cost of treating diabetes is estimated to be in the region of £1 million per day or 10% of our entire health budget. Those costs look set to increase, as predictions suggest that, by 2020, more than 94,000 people are expected to have type 1 or type 2 diabetes. Currently, we spend 10% of our health budget treating the 3.9% of the population who have diabetes.

The sad fact for many people who develop the disease is that it can be avoided by changing their lifestyle. In 2010, 80% of people with type 2 diabetes were classified as overweight or obese. It is well known that carrying excess weight is a major risk factor in developing diabetes. Statistics suggest that two thirds of

adults in Northern Ireland are overweight; however, only 40% recognise that they need to lose weight. The Minister and his Department have already brought out campaigns designed to raise awareness of obesity in our society. That is one area where personal accountability must be the number one defence.

We already know that diabetes has the potential to impact on life expectancy by between 10 and 20 years, depending on the type of diabetes that someone has. We know that members of certain socio-economic groups are more at risk of developing the disease and are less likely to have good management of it and will, therefore, need treatment for complications. We know where the information needs to be targeted to gain maximum results. Too often, it is difficult to reach the demographic groups that suffer most from such diseases. The development of a strategy for diabetes could help to ensure that they can be reached in new and innovative ways.

At present, almost 1,000 children in Northern Ireland live with diabetes. The sad statistic is that one quarter of them are likely to endure life-threatening complications. There have been stories of children's education being delayed due to schools not being able to manage their condition. There are also stories of children not being able to go on residential trips due to their suffering from diabetes or having to feel different because they have a medical condition that, for many of them, is not their fault and from which they do not have the ability to make themselves better. Therefore, the condition in childhood can have the impact of restricting educational achievement and life potential.

Diabetes costs Northern Ireland dearly. We must work harder to minimise the impact that the disease has the potential to have in our community. A combined joined-up strategy will help to raise awareness of the risk factors and ensure quality care for not just health but psychological reasons so that those with the disease can be helped to manage it more effectively and so that complications can be reduced and awareness raised in the community of what can be done to support those who have it.

Mr McDevitt: I, too, declare an interest: I am the proud father of Clara McDevitt, who is eight years old now. She was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes just before Christmas 2010. Her story is not untypical. She was misdiagnosed by a general practitioner. She ended up as an emergency admission to the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children in what is known as

severe DKA. Her blood had become very acidic as the result of the shutdown of a certain part of her pancreas and its failure to produce insulin.

I would like to take my time to speak up for the some 1,000 children in the region who are under 16 years of age and have type 1 diabetes. They are a small number, but they are very special kids. The tragedy of type 1 diabetes is that you cannot really afford too many misdiagnoses. More often than not, a severe misdiagnosis that is not discovered will be fatal. The other thing to understand about type 1 that I really want to re-emphasise is that it is utterly unavoidable. It is an autoimmune condition. You are just unlucky to get it, and there is nothing that you could do or could ever have done to stop yourself becoming a type 1 diabetic. They are still trying to get to the bottom of what actually causes it. If I could make my first plea tonight, it would be that we would continue to play an active role at regional level in research into the causes and ultimate treatment and cure of type 1 diabetes. Indeed, I welcome the announcement by Queen's University last week of £32 million towards the new research centre.

We remain the only region in these islands not to have a service framework for either type 1 or type 2 diabetes. Although I acknowledge that, since 2003, there have been improvements, the condition is currently managed under the umbrella of a framework that is designed around a different type of condition. It is generally designed around cardiovascular health and well-being. Since 2009, when that framework was introduced, concerns have been raised continually about its appropriateness for dealing with the specific requirements of those with type 1 diabetes.

The Minister will, of course, be aware of an Audit Office report in 2009 that addressed several issues around the management of diabetes. I note the commitment that he made last year to increase resources for type 2 diabetes and to put extra and renewed focus on type 1 in this region. That is important. However, the reality on the ground is that we have fewer diabetologists and diabetic support nurses per capita in this region than anywhere else. As a result, the management, in particular, of children with type 1 diabetes is considerably more difficult here than it is in other parts of these islands. As colleagues such as Mr Dunne, Mr Ramsey, Mr Dickson and Mr Buchanan pointed out, that is reflected in problems with schools and the administration of medication in schools, as well as in other aspects.

7.00 pm

Colleagues have mentioned the very fine report prepared by Diabetes UK, titled 'Diabetes in Northern Ireland: The human, social and economic challenge'. It was prepared with the support of C3 and Novo Nordisk. I thank the Minister for having joined a few of us in the Long Gallery just before the summer break to launch the report. It is a serious piece of work, and one that helps us to think our way through the necessary steps that we must take in the years ahead to improve the management of the condition. It identifies six goals, but I will bring just three of them to the House's attention.

The first is to do with education: the need to increase the capacity of young people with type 1 diabetes to be able to manage their condition. The second is to do with insulin pumps. There is a crying-out need for more insulin pumps, particularly among young people. I am very fortunate that Clara got an insulin pump only last month, and we can already see improvement in her management. There are not more pumps with more children today because of a lack of diabetes support nurses and resources to give them training. I appeal to the Minister, on behalf of all those who are the proud parents of children with type 1 diabetes, to do what he can to ensure that extra resources are there to support the provision of insulin pumps.

The only thing that diabetes stops you doing is going a bit mad on the sugars. In every other aspect, it is not, and should not be in 2012, an impediment to the lifestyle of someone with type 1 or type 2.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I thank Members for their contributions to today's debate, and I welcome the opportunity to respond to points. I may not get to them all, given the time that we have. I also want to outline my Department's approach to managing diabetes, and other long-term conditions more generally.

I am aware that diabetes is a condition that affects many people in Northern Ireland, including some Members. Members will be aware of my commitment to improve services for people with diabetes and to prevent type 2 diabetes. Let me be absolutely blunt: the vast majority of people who have type 2 diabetes should not have type 2 diabetes; they bring it on themselves. They eat too much, they drink too much and they do not take enough exercise. It

is quite simple. Self-medication should apply here, and that is to eat less, drink less and take more exercise. If people do that, they will avoid diabetes wholesale. Therefore, let us be frank on that issue. People need to change their lifestyle, and we need to challenge people on their lifestyle.

We have made a number of commitments, as I stated at the launch of diabetes week in June this year, to work on this. I have met clinicians, patients and their representatives to understand at first hand how diabetes affects individuals and their families.

Figures show that the total number of adults aged 17 and over with diabetes registered with GPs in Northern Ireland was nearly 76,000 in 2011-12. That is approximately 4% of our population. Estimates by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland in its 2010 report 'Making Chronic Conditions Count' suggest that, by 2015, over 82,000 people in Northern Ireland will be living with diabetes. The majority of those with the condition will develop it later in life and will have type 2 diabetes. However, there is emerging evidence to suggest that the number of new cases of type 1 diabetes, which primarily affects children, is also increasing. That is a life-changing diagnosis and a significant challenge for many children, adolescents and young people, and, of course, for their families.

Given the increasing prevalence, it is not surprising that GPs, hospital doctors, nurses and other health and social care professionals tell me that they are under ever-increasing pressure, as more and more patients are presenting with an increasing range of complex needs.

As Health Minister, it is not just my job to outline the challenges; I have to offer solutions. I have offered one already but, hopefully, will offer others as well. The ageing population means that we have to tackle head-on the effects of an increasing prevalence of long-term conditions; otherwise, our health system will be put under an intolerable and, indeed, unsustainable pressure. It was with that in mind that I put in place a number of new approaches to finding solutions and a more innovative approach to managing long-term conditions, in particular diabetes.

The new model for health and social care outlined in the 'Transforming Your Care' report and further elaborated in the consultation document 'Transforming Your Care: Vision to Action' presents new opportunities for how we plan and deliver services to people with long-

term conditions. Crucially, it puts the individual at the heart of decision-making. 'Transforming Your Care' identifies long-term conditions as a key area for health and social care and presents a series of proposals, including improved partnership working to enable greater self-care and prevention, and personalised care pathways to help people understand and manage long-term conditions at home. It also proposes maximising the opportunities provided by telehealth and benefits to be gained from a more integrated approach to treatment and care.

A key vehicle for a more co-ordinated and person-centred approach is the establishment of the 17 integrated care partnerships. Integrated care partnerships would bring together health and social care providers in collaborative partnerships to work together to improve how services are delivered on the ground. It is anticipated that much of the initial focus of the integrated care partnerships would be on the frail and elderly and on specific long-term conditions, namely diabetes, stroke services and respiratory conditions.

Many of the principles that underpin that new model of care are also reflected in 'Living with Long Term Conditions', my Department's policy framework for adults with long-term conditions, which I launched in April this year. The framework provides a strategic direction for the reform and modernisation of services into the future for people with long-term conditions.

The framework sets out how outcomes for people with long-term conditions can be improved through more partnership working, supported self-management, support for carers, and access to patient information and education, so that people with long-term conditions have the knowledge and skills they need to manage their conditions more effectively. That can include optimising medicines management, with the support of community pharmacists; the use of new technology to facilitate telemonitoring; or making lifestyle changes to maintain or enhance health and well-being.

The importance of patient information and education in supporting self-management is underscored by the inclusion in the Programme for Government 2011-15 of a commitment to enrol people with long-term conditions, and who want to be enrolled, in a dedicated chronic condition management programme. A delivery plan has been developed to drive the achievement of that commitment, and officials from my Department are working with colleagues in the Public Health Agency to

establish information on patient education programmes across each of the health and social care trusts. That information will inform the future commissioning of patient education programmes.

In 2003, a blueprint for diabetes care was developed with the joint CREST/Diabetes UK task force report. The joint task force framework for diabetes care sets standards for the prevention, early detection, care and treatment of diabetes.

Since the publication of the CREST/Diabetes UK framework, there has been significant investment in diabetes services. For example, £3 million has been provided to recruit more than 70 additional staff from a range of disciplines to provide services for people with diabetes; £0.8 million was invested in the development of a comprehensive screening programme for diabetic retinopathy for all people with diabetes over the age of 12; £0.8 million was invested to tackle obesity, and £0.85 million has been directed towards promoting physical activity, and food and nutritional initiatives.

In 2011-12, £4 million was provided to GP practices, through the equality and outcomes framework, to ensure the provision of good-quality care for people with diabetes. Non-recurrent funding of £255,000 was made available in 2010-11 to start insulin pump therapy for 60 children and young people. Additional funding was secured in 2011-12 for a Co-operation and Working Together cross-border diabetes project for an additional 80 pumps for children.

Further to that, £2.5 million was allocated last year to purchase 1,100 insulin pumps. It is expected that those will be phased in and will significantly reduce the time that patients have to wait for the therapy, as well as replacing pumps that have reached the end of their lifespan. In addition, and in recognition of the fact that diabetes is a major risk factor in other areas, £9 million has been invested in cardiovascular services, £14 million in stroke services and £8 million to expand renal capacity.

I want to ensure that the cases of type 2 diabetes are, as far as possible, prevented. That is why I have committed considerable resources to public health programmes, as I already outlined. There is an obligation on all of us, however, to adopt lifestyles that will help to ensure, as far as possible, our own health and well-being. My Department's obesity prevention strategy and framework, which I launched in

March, encourages people to take responsibility for their own health and eat a healthy, well-balanced, nutritious diet as well as engaging in more physical activity.

As part of a wider approach to health promotion and prevention, my Department is consulting on a new 10-year public health strategic 'Fit and Well – Changing Lives' framework, which emphasises the importance of a multisectoral approach to tackling inequalities in health. It also reinforces the importance of preventative measures in reducing the number of people developing long-term conditions by supporting individuals to take responsibility for their own health.

I referred to some of the complications associated with diabetes: sight loss and renal and circulatory problems, which can, in some instances, lead to amputation. In fact, there were 237 amputations last year. I have seen the devastating effects that such complications have on individual lives. We need to ensure, through education and earlier interventions, that we can help people with diabetes to maintain or enhance their health and well-being and minimise the adverse effects of the condition. That requires a systemised approach to patient review, vigorous evidence-based intervention and informed patient self-management.

The 2003 CREST/Diabetes UK joint framework is now almost a decade old, and times have moved on. We have an ageing population, and there are now more people living with diabetes and other long-term conditions. So, we need to ensure that we look ahead and determine how best to maximise the resources that we have.

With that in mind, in January this year I asked the Chief Medical Officer to initiate a review of diabetes care. The purpose of the review is to focus on where we are in relation to the original CREST/Diabetes UK framework to identify the gaps in service provision. I have also specifically requested that the review should identify emergent issues in diabetes care and that it include the assessment of diabetes care for children in relation to the aspirations of the original CREST/Diabetes UK framework.

I am pleased to report that that work is well under way, and the review team has brought together clinicians and health professionals from a range of disciplines, as well as representatives from Diabetes UK. I expect that the review group will report its findings to me early next year —

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time has gone.

Mr Poots: — and that will provide a strategic direction for diabetes care. Time has beaten us, Mr Speaker, and I will write to the Members in response to questions that they posed.

Mr Molloy: I thank the Minister for making a winding-up speech. I thank Pat Ramsey for securing the debate tonight, after a bit of flexibility and pressurising to get a space for it. It is an important debate, and we have had the debate here before. The all-party group was then set up, and that was an important dimension in trying to move the thing along and bring various MLAs together.

I declare an interest in that I am one of those people, Minister, who probably should have avoided it, but I do have type B diabetes. A difficulty for so many people is that you do not know that before you get it, and when you get it, it is too late. That is one of the difficulties around all of this.

I would like to see some of the issues that we have talked about today dealt with on a broader scale. For instance, 76,000 people are suffering from diabetes, and, as Kieran said, possibly another 10,000 who may be suffering but do not know it. That is important: the number of people who are walking about with diabetes and who have not been diagnosed.

We all eat food in various forms, and the processors and manufacturers have a responsibility also to ensure that there is the least sugar content in all the breads that are available. With coeliacs, for instance, particular loaves have to be gluten-free yet we do not have any recommendations around the whole issue of bread and other foods with high sugar content. High salt content also has a big effect on diabetes and heart illnesses. It is important for those manufacturers and processors to recognise that there is a major market of diabetes sufferers who cannot get the proper foods because of the amount of sugar and salt in them. I would like them to look at that and see the market that is there.

Many Members spoke about the £1 million daily cost to the Executive. That is a massive amount of money that is actually going into trying to deal with diabetes. It is important that we try to find, if not solutions, because at this time, unfortunately, we do not have them, at least ways of managing the condition.

Good management and control are very important, as Pat said. The whole issue is about trying to develop a strategy so that it is not just left to the individual who has diabetes. It is about how you manage that. It is about

trying to get a joined-up approach across the various Departments to ensure that all Departments look at how it can be managed, how they can have an influence on it, how they can provide services that might help to deal with it and how they can manage the process on a wider range. That will mean, to some extent, legislation in various ways in relation to the contents of food and how food affects us.

7.15 pm

Sue Ramsey said that good communication and education are very important. She also spoke of the importance of training for school staff to support young people who have diabetes to ensure that they are able to continue their schooling. The funding for nurses in the diabetes sector is very important so that people know about it. It is also important to have a wider remit of people who recognise the symptoms of diabetes at a very early stage instead of waiting until, unfortunately, it is too late.

Tom Buchanan was alarmed at the increase in the level of diabetes. I think that the increase right across the various constituencies is running at about 33%. That is quite an alarming figure. The fact that 10% of our health budget goes on the treatment of it is also alarming.

Roy Beggs identified that some of his family members were in the same situation. This is relevant right across all our constituencies: so many families are affected by diabetes. It may be one or two members of a family at this time. I do not think that there is a family in any area that is untouched by diabetes and its effects. It is very important to note not only the amount of money that is being spent every day but how it is being spent. One in five hospital admissions is in relation to heart conditions and various illnesses that are associated with diabetes. We could deal with different illnesses if we could get to a stage where diabetes can be dealt with in the community.

Stewart Dickson spoke about the costs of dealing with diabetes. He said that it was a major drain on the health service and that we need to move more into community support. That is where there is a lack of activity. Although some GPs have a very good service, others do not. You find that, in more rural areas, there are gaps in the service. You find that people are frustrated because they do not get direct applications. They are being deferred for long periods; the gap between examinations can be very great. That endangers people in the future.

Gordon Dunne said that one in 20 people in the UK suffers from diabetes. A healthy lifestyle is one way of dealing with that, but, again, the big problem with all of that is that it is usually too late by the time that we realise that. Everyone is saying that there needs to be some means of identifying that and dealing with it at an earlier stage. Gordon highlighted the case of the young fella who was being treated and could not take up his school place. We need to have a standard right across the board areas in education and health to ensure that every child gets the same treatment and application and that the response time for referrals is more unified, because there seems to be variations.

Alex Easton repeated the costs to the health service. He said that two thirds of people are overweight, and he spoke about the effects that that has. Alex also talked about diabetes reducing people's lifespan. Some people might not realise that, without the proper treatment, it can reduce life expectancy by 20 years in some cases — and even sometimes with the proper treatment, because it develops as we go along.

Conall McDevitt raised the issue of his daughter being misdiagnosed, and he spoke about getting into that dangerous situation. It is so often the case that there are misdiagnoses. Sometimes, people are not diagnosed at all; they are walking about with the illness and do not realise. We need to try to find a means of identifying that at an earlier stage. That is particularly the case with young children, who are probably in and out of health centres more often getting injections and various things. Maybe there are other ways of identifying diabetes at an early stage. That is very important.

There is also the issue of there being no service framework. There is no focus on diabetes and on how it is linked to the broader general health of people. That is very important. We need support in schools to ensure that young people can attend.

We also have the issue of insulin pumps, to which the Minister responded. We need to emphasise that again. So many young people, particularly children, find that it is better to use insulin pumps than injections or other mechanisms. Insulin pumps should be a priority. More and more people with type 2 diabetes have to take insulin in their later years. It is not just those with type 1 diabetes who require insulin.

The Minister said that people with type 2 diabetes should not have the condition. That is a very simple solution. Unfortunately, however,

when people have it, they cannot get rid of it. So, I go back to the point that we need early education and awareness. There are so many illnesses that we could say are a person's own fault, and there are illnesses that are the result of smoking, drinking and other things. What the Minister said is not a solution. It may be a way of criticising the condition and warning people about it, but we need to warn people at a younger age to make sure that they do not get it.

As I said, I have type 2 diabetes, and I probably had it for between 12 and 18 months before I knew it. That was despite having most of the symptoms that have been highlighted, such as fatigue, lack of energy, thirst and bad feet. I went to a GP a number of times and pointed those things out, but it took some time before the GP decided to examine me for diabetes.

There is also confusion in the health service and in the provision in some clinics. Very often, for example, people are on a number of different medications. They may take aspirin as a preventative treatment for heart conditions, but some doctors say that aspirin has side effects and that perhaps people should not be on it. People look to doctors and GPs for guidance, and if there is confusion among doctors, a patient will not know what to do. It is important that we get the procedure —

Mr Speaker: Your time is almost gone.

Mr Molloy: As we go forward, we need a diabetes strategy. Thank you very much, everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the increase in the number of people diagnosed with type 1 and type 2 diabetes; further notes the specific increase in type 1 diabetes amongst children; acknowledges the cost to the health service of managing diabetes; and calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce urgently a properly resourced diabetes strategy.

Adjourned at 7.23 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Executive's Economy and Jobs
Initiative

*Published at 12.30 pm on Thursday 8
November 2012*

**Mr P Robinson (The First Minister) and Mr M
McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):**

We wish to make a Statement to the Assembly about a new initiative to boost jobs and the economy. When the Executive published its Programme for Government and Economic Strategy in March, we set out how we planned to grow the economy and tackle disadvantage.

Departments across the Executive are making significant progress in implementing their Programme for Government and Economic Strategy commitments. This activity will improve the competitiveness of the local economy and deliver higher levels of sustainable growth and employment.

However, we recognised that our Economic Strategy needed to be flexible. Low growth in our key markets is continuing to dampen our economic recovery and we have therefore concluded it is necessary to take further action to support the local labour market.

We have made resources available over the remainder of this budget period to implement a range of additional short-term measures and we have supplemented this activity by diverting further resources to projects which will boost employment in the construction sector in the short-term. The measures within this Economy and Jobs Initiative are set out in the attached paper.

We remain committed to growing a sustainable economy and tackling disadvantage. We will take a close interest in seeing that these measures are effectively delivered alongside the existing Programme for Government and Economic Strategy targets. We are also continuing to examine other ideas that may help us deliver our goals.



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