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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 1 July 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Dickson Plan

Mr Speaker: Mr Stephen Moutray has sought leave to present a public petition. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter.

Mr Moutray: At the outset, Mr Speaker, I thank you for agreeing to accept the petition this afternoon. What I will present to you in the form of almost 5,000 signatures, both online and in paper format, demonstrates clearly the level of local support for the exceptional education system known as the Dickson two-tier system for the Craigavon and Tandragee areas.

The petition was launched back in mid April. From that day forward, support for the Dickson plan and its retention has been demonstrated day after day, with continuous streams of people coming to sign the petition and make their views and support known. We sincerely thank each person who put their name to the petition and supported our campaign thus far.

Politicians are sometimes accused of not listening to the people: on this occasion, we are listening. The message that continues to be sent loud and clear is this: save and retain the Dickson plan.

A very public battle has been raging in recent days. An attempt has been made by the Minister of Education and the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) to decimate the Dickson plan and destroy the system that we all love and cherish. That system, implemented four decades ago, provides a tailor-made educational experience for children, whether they be academic or vocational, and allows for academic selection at the age of 14 as opposed to 11, which allows time for young people to mature and feel more confident about their lot in life. However, what is planned for Craigavon, which the Minister appears to have a predetermined view on even before consulting the people, is a

comprehensive all-ability school that puts children in a one-size-fits-all box. One size does not fit all. Children have different abilities and, as has been noted recently in the Ofsted report in England, comprehensive schools are failing children, particularly the most academic.

Why would we in Craigavon move away from a system that has excellent inspection reports and schools of a high standard? The people have openly rejected this and will continue to do so. The consultation process that the SELB has been involved in has been flawed with preferred options being recommended by the board. There has been a lack of consultation with the local primary schools and a total disregard for the 3,000 people who supported option b.

I will close with a statement made by the Minister of Education in the House on 15 April:

"We know through experience that imposing solutions on communities simply does not work." — [Official Report, Vol 84, No 1, p59, col 2].

It is now time for the Education Minister to listen to our community and to retain the Dickson plan for future generations.

Mr Moutray moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Chair of the Education Committee.

Public Petition: Envagh Primary School, Omagh, St Francis of Assisi Primary School, Castlederg, and Newtownstewart Model Primary School

Mr Speaker: Mr Joe Byrne has sought leave to present a public petition. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the chance to bring forward a petition on behalf of three primary schools in the Newtownstewart, Dregish and Spamount areas of Castleterg. The undersigned are concerned about the draft Western Education and Library Board (WELB) strategic area plan proposals for the Western Board area and the effect that they will have on all our rural schools and the communities that they support. Rural schools are the focus of their communities, and those communities believe that any proposals that involve change need to be thoroughly investigated before any action is taken.

The petition is presented on behalf of Envagh Primary School, Newtownstewart Model Primary School and St Francis of Assisi Primary School. The petition contains 1,441 signatures of those who share the concerns about the future of rural education in that part of west Tyrone.

On 19 March, the WELB draft strategic action plan was published. It stated that the managing authority had agreed action on the potential closure of Envagh Primary School. That recommendation was made after a review by Mr Andrew Walsh, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) adviser. The board of governors is very disappointed that the school is not being afforded the opportunity to seek a local area solution in consultation with the other small schools, controlled and maintained, in the immediate vicinity that are in similar circumstances or have been asked to find a local area solution.

The Northern Ireland Executive rural White Paper action plan provides policy on supporting vibrant rural communities. That policy recognises the vulnerability of rural communities; challenges to infrastructure, particularly transport; the need to maintain and develop rural economies; and the need to support the delivery of public services in rural communities to support social cohesion. These local primary schools in the Ardstraw East area of west Tyrone are extremely concerned that, if the 105-pupil criterion is adhered to, it will signal the death knell for many of these primary schools. I call on the Minister to review the damage that the 105 criterion is causing. Even though the Minister has stated recently that he does not want to close rural primary schools, the reality is that parents are making decisions and choices. They want their children to go to schools that will be viable and sustainable into the future, and there is gross concern that, if there is still strong adherence to the 105 number for primary schools, it could sound the

death knell for up to 40 primary schools in west Tyrone alone.

Mr Byrne moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister and send a copy to the Chair of the Education Committee.

Public Petition: Westlands Home, Cookstown

Mr Speaker: Mrs Sandra Overend has sought leave to present a public petition. The Member will, once again, have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter.

Mrs Overend: On behalf of Cookstown O4O — Older People for Older People — it gives me great pleasure to present to you this petition in support of Westlands home. On behalf of its residents and all those in the Cookstown district who are concerned about the future of this excellent provision, I commend Cookstown O4O and especially its president, Margaret Gilbert MBE, for drawing up the petition. I commend its members and all the businesses and community organisations that collected the 5,010 signatures in the space of 14 days. The support of those signatories in the Cookstown district is certainly to be applauded.

I visited Westlands Care Home recently and heard at first hand about the high regard in which its residents hold it, the excellent care that they receive and their concerns about their future. It was unfortunate that the outworkings of Transforming Your Care saw the untimely and badly managed announcement to each resident in Westlands that they would have to look for alternative accommodation in the short space of a few months. This caused terrible anxiety to those residents, and the general health of many suffered as a result.

People in the Cookstown district have felt very strongly not only about the way that changes are handled with regard to Westlands Care Home but about the fact that the home is to be closed. Despite the personal assurances given to individuals by the Health Minister that the home would not be closed, he has yet to repeat those assurances in public, leaving the residents with a real sense of unease and anxiety. It seems that the Health Minister wishes to close the home by stealth, and he and his trust are refusing any new residents into Westlands Care Home while giving false assurances that the home would remain open as long as the number of residents was in

double figures. Some of those residents have come to Parliament Buildings today and are watching from the Public Gallery. We hope that the Health Minister's new consultation will be open and transparent and take into consideration the views of the people who will be most affected by the potential closures: the vulnerable people who live in these homes and those in the Cookstown area who wish the Westlands option to remain.

As I present the petition in support of Westlands Care Home, I challenge the Health Minister to take some time today, when residents and family members are here in Stormont, to meet them and take 15 minutes out of his busy schedule to talk to them. Despite having recently received a letter from the Health Minister refusing to meet me on the issue, today I repeat my request that he discuss openly and honestly with the residents his plans for Westlands Care Home.

The residents of the care homes all over Northern Ireland are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They deserve honesty and respect and to be able to live in a permanent and secure environment of their choosing, which I hope the Minister can guarantee. Mr Speaker, I take pleasure in presenting the petition to you.

Mrs Overend moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward a copy of the petition to the Health Minister and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Health Committee.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Resolved:

That in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 1 July 2013 be extended to no later than 9.00 pm. — [Mr P Ramsey.]

12.15 pm

Committee of the Regions

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that this be treated as a business motion and therefore there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That this Assembly nominates Ms Megan Fearon as a full member on the UK delegation to the Committee of the Regions. — [Ms Ruane.]

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Aquaculture and Marine

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement, in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act, regarding the recent twenty-third meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in aquaculture and marine sectoral format. The meeting was held in Carlingford on Wednesday 3 May. The Executive were represented by Nelson McCausland and me. The Southern Government were represented by the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources, Pat Rabbitte TD, and Fergus O'Dowd TD, Minister of State, Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources. The statement has been agreed with Minister McCausland, and I make it on behalf of us both.

Ministers were informed of the retirement of Loughs Agency chief executive officer, Derick Anderson, and noted that arrangements were under way to recruit a replacement. Ministers recorded their thanks for the enormous contribution made by Mr Anderson in the development of the Loughs Agency during his 13-year tenure and wished him a long and enjoyable retirement. Ministers also noted the death in January of former board member Thomas Sloan. Thomas joined the board of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission in December 2007 and was an active member of the board's aquaculture and shell fisheries subcommittee. Thomas was a valued member of the commission's board and will be much missed.

The vice-chairperson, Alan McCulla, and the acting chief executive, John Pollock, delivered a progress report on the work of the Loughs Agency. We noted that the first meeting of the third Foyle Area and Carlingford Area Advisory Forum took place on 9 April and that members had appointed Mr Peter Archdale as chairperson and Mr Paul O'Donovan as vice-chair of the forum.

We welcomed the agency's ongoing conservation and protection efforts, including the fact that the agency responded to over 100 pollution incidents in 2012 and seized a total of 136 illegal nets. It was reported that adverse weather conditions at the start of the 2013 season had made redd counting difficult but had also resulted in a reduction of poachers on

the rivers. The agency also reported that it had made a declaration of closure on the River Finn in order to continue to protect that special area of conservation. That will make the River Finn a catch-and-release river for the 2013 season and suspend downstream commercial salmon fisheries.

Progress has also been made on increasing marine tourism and angling development. That has been enhanced by the agency's prominent engagement with the City of Culture and the important promotional opportunity afforded by the partnership with Tate and the Turner Prize, which is to take place in Derry later this year and at which the agency is hosting an opening reception. Additionally, the agency highlighted its role in supporting the angling element of the World Police and Fire Games, its involvement with the Flavours of the Foyle seafood festival and its support for the Carlingford Oyster Festival, not forgetting the World Youth Fly Fishing Championship.

We also discussed concerns over the Narrow Water bridge project. However, we welcome the fact that it has now been given the green light. Ministers also discussed the situation regarding the A5 and the Loughs Agency's work with the Department for Regional Development (DRD) to meet commitments under the habitats directive. I reassured Ministers Rabbitte and O'Dowd of the Executive's commitment to the delivery of the A5.

The Council enjoyed a presentation by Dr Ciaran Byrne, chief executive of Inland Fisheries Ireland, on the meeting of the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO) that was due to take place in Drogheda from 4 to 7 June. At that event, conservation strategies for North Atlantic salmon stocks and methods to increase the profile of salmon conservation were discussed by managers, scientists and non-governmental organisations from a wide range of countries. The importance of a sustainable Irish salmon population to tourism and the economic benefits that flow from salmon angling were also recognised. The Council acknowledged the engagement between the boards of the Loughs Agency and Inland Fisheries Ireland and their ongoing collaboration.

The Council was also informed about a review of angling involving the Loughs Agency, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Ulster Angling Federation, the Ulster provincial council of the Irish Federation of Sea Anglers and the Ulster Coarse Fishing Federation, together with sport-related bodies and the

Tourist Board, to develop a joined-up approach to demonstrate the social and economic benefits of angling and the development of the angling product.

In relation to the pension arrangements for the Loughs Agency, we noted the recommendation by sponsor Departments that the Loughs Agency should join the North/South pension scheme and that that was being considered by the respective Finance Departments.

The Council approved the procedure to continue to support the Loughs Agency in dealing with emergencies, such as pollution incidents, through regulation. The procedure was approved for another year up to July 2014, and the Council agreed to review its operation on the basis of a report to be completed by the agency and the sponsor Departments before 20 July 2014.

We agreed to meet again in aquaculture and marine format in October 2013.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I thank the Minister for her statement, but, again, the statement is more about what is not in it and the lack of detail in it. The Committee recently attended the largest seafood trade show in the world when we were in Brussels. Although we were impressed by the stands and the presentations of all our neighbours and competitors — England, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland — only one company was flying the flag for Northern Ireland. Will the Minister explain why the development and marketing of our seafood offering is not on the agenda for the North/South aquaculture and marine sectoral meetings, considering that it is a key target in the 'Going for Growth' chapter on fish and aquaculture? We also hear that there has been a progress report on the Loughs Agency's work, but we have heard nothing about the details or the progress that it has made.

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question and, in particular, the point about marketing the great product that we have. It is a challenge. It is wider than the Loughs Agency's remit, in that its job is to promote the Foyle and Carlingford catchment areas. One of the recommendations in the agrifood strategy report looks at the marketing of our products, and we need to enhance that work further in the time ahead. The Loughs Agency is involved in a number of marketing events, particularly around the City of Culture. We have the Foyle seafood festival and the Carlingford Oyster Festival, which are good opportunities to market

seafood. There are lots of opportunities, and we need to ensure that seafood is always promoted.

I gave a flavour of the detail of the update report on the Loughs Agency's work. However, if the Chairperson wishes, I am happy to write to the Committee to give it a more detailed breakdown of the Loughs Agency's work over the past number of months.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. She referred to the A5 and the habitats directive. First, will she give an assurance that the Loughs Agency will do everything in its power to co-operate with DRD to make sure that the commitment under the habitats directive can be dealt with as soon as possible? Secondly, will the Minister give any assurance to rod fishermen who are members of fishing and angling clubs that they can have representation on the Loughs Agency in the future? They feel aggrieved that they have not had adequate representation.

Mrs O'Neill: The Executive are still committed to seeing the A5 project through, and I am happy to guarantee that the Loughs Agency will do everything that it can to clear up the issue that was raised with the habitats directive. There is some confusion over the Loughs Agency's involvement in that issue. The scheme was stopped by the High Court judgement, which found that there had been a failure to carry out an appropriate assessment of the River Foyle and River Finn special areas of conservation under the habitats directive. That judgement was the result of an injunction case taken by the Alternative A5 Alliance, a group of objectors made up of a number of people who live along the route of the proposed scheme. Part of the Alternative A5 Alliance's evidence was a submission by the Loughs Agency to the open public inquiry on the road scheme. The Loughs Agency gave evidence to the public inquiry under its duty to conserve and protect salmon inland fisheries in the area, and its evidence was not challenged. In simple terms, we will make absolutely sure that there is no ambiguity and that everything is cleared up. The Loughs Agency continues to work with DRD officials to make sure that that happens and that this does not become a barrier to the project moving forward as quickly as possible.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her statement and answers so far. I also thank my colleague from the Agriculture Committee, Joe Byrne, for stealing the question that I was about to ask. I will go into a bit more detail. Does the Minister accept that the Loughs Agency's

evidence led to the derailment of the A5 project and that it bears considerable responsibility, albeit under the Minister's predecessor and the Regional Development Minister's predecessor, Conor Murphy?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I do not agree that that is the case. As I said, there has been some ambiguity and, I think, a lot of confusion about the role that the Loughs Agency played in the judgement and where that sits now. The Loughs Agency has been working very closely with DRD on making sure that everything is cleared up and that there is no barrier to the project moving forward as quickly as possible. The work is ongoing with Roads Service, and it engages weekly to make sure that everything is cleared up. This will not be a barrier to the project going forward.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement this afternoon. In paragraph 8, she tells us:

"the agency responded to over 100 pollution incidents".

Surely, that is a shocking number in any one year, bringing with it horrendous damage to our waterways. Can the Minister tell how much of that pollution was down to Departments' breaches? Who pays for the pollution?

Mrs O'Neill: I cannot give a breakdown of where the pollution comes from relevant to each Department, but suffice it to say that the pollution came from a range of sources, including the farm waste industry and sewerage-related issues. So there is a combination of pollution incidents, and our tackling of that is ongoing. Relatively speaking, the figures have remained reasonably low. I know that 100 sounds like a lot, but the level of incidents has remained pretty low, and we have had no fish kill as a result of those that occurred, so that is very positive as well.

Mr Buchanan: My question follows on from the previous one on paragraph 8:

"the agency responded to over 100 pollution incidents ... and seized a total of 136 illegal nets."

Will the Minister advise the House how many people were prosecuted, and what was the level of that prosecution?

If the Speaker will allow me, I also want to refer to paragraph 11 regarding the Loughs Agency and its initial report on the A5. How can we be

assured this time that the report being done will meet the requirements to allow the A5 to progress?

Mrs O'Neill: I will pick up on the second point first. I give a commitment that I will ensure that the Loughs Agency engages, as it does weekly with Roads Service, to make sure that the issue is sorted out as quickly as possible and that it will not be a barrier to the A5 project going forward.

The detail of prosecutions and seizures is as follows: the agency reports that the seizures for 2012 were 76 fishing rods, 136 nets, 16 boats and two vehicles; and the figures for 2011 were 44 fishing rods, 161 nets and 14 boats and vehicles. So there have been quite a number of seizures. Quite often, the number of prosecutions does not relate to the number of seizures because an individual may be prosecuted on numerous charges based on one incident. I can write to the Member and give him a breakdown of the number of prosecutions over the past year.

Mr McAleer: First, I am glad to note that the A5 was raised at the NSMC meeting. I am also happy to hear the Minister assure us that the Loughs Agency will play its part to enable the Minister for Regional Development to make the appropriate assessment later. Will the Minister give some details of the seizures made by the Loughs Agency since the last meeting?

Mrs O'Neill: I will give you a breakdown of the number of fish and shellfish that the agency has seized: 79 salmon, 10 brown trout, six sea trout, two rainbow trout, 13 roach, one pike, two hybrids and 19 bags of oysters. A large number of fishing equipment and assorted items were also seized, and, in particular, knives, baseball bats, pulley systems and hammers — you name it. The agency has seized quite a number of items.

I am delighted to say that, since the last time that I updated the House on the NSMC, there have been no further attacks on Loughs Agency staff, which we all welcome given last year's serious incidents.

Mr Rogers: I apologise to the Minister for missing the first couple of paragraphs of her statement. On paragraph 10, may I seek an assurance from the Minister that the concerns of the mussel fishermen will be addressed, thus enabling the Minister for Regional Development to sign off on the bridge order?

12.30 pm

Mrs O'Neill: Yes, absolutely. We have been doing a lot of work, including on the design of the bridge, with the fishermen to make sure that we can minimise any impact on them. Those meetings have been ongoing with my Department and with the Department of the Environment (DOE) on the licence. Those discussions are ongoing, and I think that we have militated against any negative impact that there would be on the fishermen.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I also welcome the Minister's statement. In the light of Mr McCarthy's question, will the Minister give us an in-depth update on the pollution incidents in the Foyle and Carlingford areas, le do thoil?

Mrs O'Neill: Further to the answer that I gave to Mr McCarthy, the number of significant pollution incidents that Loughs Agency staff detected or investigated in the catchments has remained statistically low, and there were no recorded fish kills in the catchment in 2012. Agency staff dealt with a total of about 100 pollution incidents in 2012, and, in 29% of cases, no pollution was found. Almost half the incidents related to farm industry and sewage-related pollution.

Public Expenditure: Provisional Out-turn 2012-13 and 2013-14 June Monitoring

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

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I was not sure whether I was doing the Financial Provisions Bill or the provisional out-turn first. So, I am glad that you clarified that for me.

I thank you for the opportunity to make the statement today on two important public expenditure items. First, I am pleased to inform the House of the outcome of the 2012-13 provisional out-turn and the Executive's June monitoring exercise.

Before going into the specifics of the provisional out-turn and June monitoring, I want to say a few words about last week's UK spending review announcement. The spending review outcome, for us, was as good as we could have expected, given the UK Government's ongoing emphasis on fiscal consolidation. Our resource

departmental expenditure limit (DEL) will increase by 0.6% in cash terms, compared with 2014-15. On the capital side, the outcome is even more positive, with a cash increase of 3.3%, again compared with the 2014-15 position. However, some £104 million of that additional capital DEL is ring-fenced for financial transactions funding, and that makes it critically important that the Executive now develop good schemes that can make best use of that funding. I will say more about that later.

That said, it is not all good news. I am increasingly worried about the lack of progress on welfare reform. Just last week, I received a letter from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on that issue. That letter makes it clear that, if the Executive do not implement relevant welfare reform elements by January 2014, our block grant will be adjusted. The costs are potentially huge. The Chief Secretary has indicated that failure to align our welfare policy with the rest of the United Kingdom is costing the Exchequer some £5 million a month in foregone annually managed expenditure (AME) savings. In the longer term, that could rise to £200 million per annum by 2017-18.

I cannot emphasise enough that we must avoid incurring those penalties. The Executive and the Assembly must therefore make progress in making welfare reform a key priority. Failure to do so would be a great disservice to the people of Northern Ireland, who rely on the public services that our Departments deliver. With that word of warning, I will return to the provisional out-turn and June monitoring.

First, I will address the provisional out-turn. It is critical for the Executive. Not only does it indicate a strong indication of departmental budget management performance during the past financial year but it determines the amount of resources that the Executive can plan to carry forward through the devolved Administration Budget exchange scheme (BES).

The scheme allows the Executive to carry forward end-of-year underspends up to a limit of 0.6% of resource DEL (RDEL) and 1.5% of capital DEL (CDEL). For 2012-13, the Budget exchange scheme limits amount to £49.5 million of non-ring-fenced resource DEL and £13.6 million of capital DEL. Both limits exclude the Department of Justice (DOJ), which is subject to separate end-of-year arrangements. Members should note that any underspend recorded above those amounts will be lost to the Executive. It will simply go back to the Exchequer.

Before I can detail the Budget exchange carry-forward, it is necessary to highlight the individual departmental position. As usual, the Executive's focus is on the non-ring-fenced RDEL. The non-cash ring-fenced RDEL element is handled separately, as it is strictly controlled by Her Majesty's Treasury and cannot be used for any other purpose, so if it is not used for the purpose for which it is designated, it stays with Treasury.

I will start with the departmental outcome. In their provisional out-turn returns, Departments registered total underspends of £27.9 million of RDEL and £25.6 million of CDEL. That is detailed in the tables that are attached to the statement. The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) recorded the largest percentage of RDEL underspend, at 3.8%. I am sorry that Mr Kinahan is not in the Chamber to hear that message. Although I recognise that, in monetary terms, it is small, it is important to note that the NIAO and organisations like it use up scarce resources that could otherwise be deployed by the Executive to deliver essential front line services. Of course, that is true of all Departments. All the main Departments returned resource underspends of 1.2% or less, with the exception of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), which recorded a 7.9% overspend for a somewhat exceptional reason.

Members will be well aware that DETI lodged a bid for an allocation of some £18 million to write off the EU debtor for the Titanic visitor centre. That bid was not considered by the Executive, and that is why DETI has now registered an overspend in its 2012-13 RDEL budget. However, that budget overspend has now been factored into the overall provisional out-turn outcome. Indeed, I can now confirm that DETI and its colleagues in my Department's EU division have since identified alternative projects for inclusion in the EU programme. I will provide further information on that issue when I come to the June monitoring position.

Members will probably not be surprised to hear that capital underspends were greater in percentage terms. That is, of course, due to the fact that it is more difficult to manage capital budgets. However, the most important thing is that the overall departmental capital underspend was low. I will move on to the implications for carry-forward of resources.

The Budget exchange scheme carry-forward is determined at Northern Ireland block level and excludes the Department of Justice. Therefore, DOJ needs to be excluded from the figures, and account also needs to be taken of the various

centre items that impact on the overall block position. DOJ accounted for a significant proportion of total departmental underspend. When that was excluded, the total underspend reduced to £20.9 million of RDEL and £11.3 million of CDEL. That corresponds to just 0.2% and 1% of RDEL and CDEL respectively. That is a remarkable spending performance by Departments. It is testament to the sound Budget management that is exercised by the Executive throughout the financial year. In other words, we are spending the money that was allocated, for the purpose for which it was allocated, in the year for which it was allocated. That is important.

I will now deal with the centre adjustments. On the capital side, there was a minor downward adjustment to our reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing and a small residual amount impacting on the position. That means that the Executive can now carry forward £12 million of CDEL into 2013-14.

On the resource side, there were four centre adjustments. The regional rate provisional out-turn outcome was £4.4 million higher than forecast at the January monitoring. This was due to a number of factors, but it was mainly because of reductions in irrecoverable losses and an increase in income. There was also £4.4 million carried forward from the outcome of the late reallocation exercise conducted by the Executive in March. The Executive also paid out slightly less in RRI interest payments than forecast, and there was a small balancing adjustment between the ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced categories. The impact of all of these issues is that the Executive can now plan to carry forward £29.9 million of RDEL into 2013-14.

As I indicated, the Department of Justice has separate end-of-year flexibility arrangements covering this spending review period. Under those arrangements, the DOJ can carry forward an unlimited amount of resources from one year to the next. However, any funding carried forward must first be used to address additional security pressures, although certain exceptions apply in each particular year. For 2012-13, the DOJ is allowed to carry forward capital underspend in respect of Desertcreat for drawdown in future years within this spending period. I can confirm that the DOJ will now carry forward £13.2 million of capital DEL underspend in relation to Desertcreat, and that can be drawn down either in this financial year or the next.

Before turning to the June monitoring round, I think that it is worth repeating the exceptional

overall spending performance of just 0.2% RDEL and 1% CDEL. On the resource side, that is equivalent to an individual on a median weekly wage having just 92p left over at the end of the week. That is good budgeting, and I think that Departments, Ministers, etc, must be congratulated on that. The Executive's excellent budget management has again meant that no money has been surrendered to Her Majesty's Treasury and that we will have additional resources to allocate in the June monitoring round, which I will say more about next.

Before setting out the resources available and the allocations agreed by the Executive in this monitoring round, I would like to highlight two important strategic issues that the Executive have reached agreement on. The first is the reprofiling of asset management unit (AMU) capital receipts, which I know that Mr Bradley will be interested in, and the second is a new end-of-year flexibility scheme for our further education colleges.

Members will recall that the Executive agreed, as part of their four-year Budget, to task the AMU with delivering an additional £100 million of capital receipts over this Budget period. To date, the AMU is on target to deliver those additional capital receipts. However, the recent decision by the UK Government to switch funding from resource to capital, coupled with delay in some major local capital projects, means that the Executive now have much more capital funding available in this financial year than had been anticipated in March 2011, when the Budget was initially agreed.

That relative abundance of capital funding at the expense of resource funding reduces the pressing need for delivering significant additional capital receipts at this stage, particularly when the realisation of those receipts involves disposal of revenue-generating assets. The Executive have therefore agreed that £23 million of income-generating assets previously earmarked for disposal in 2014-15 should now be retained, with a view to enhancing the value for future disposal.

The Executive also agreed a new end-of-year flexibility (EYF) scheme for our further education sector. It is similar to the scheme that has already been agreed for local schools, which Members will be well aware of. The need for that EYF scheme has arisen due to the recent reclassification of our further education (FE) colleges and Stranmillis University College to the government sector. The impact on our FE colleges is significant, because as NDPBs,

they are now required to follow the financial year reporting and budgeting cycle. That imposes significant budgetary constraints on the FE colleges in respect of financial management. The operation of the new end-year flexibility scheme will assist our FE colleges in managing their budgets in this new environment.

12.45 pm

I would now like to turn to the specifics of the June monitoring round. The starting point for this monitoring round is the overcommitment position, which resulted from the Budget realignment and technical exercise agreed by the Executive last year. That led to a starting overcommitment on the resource side of £41.8 million, with £20.2 million of capital investment funding available. There were also a number of centre items, which, along with the starting overcommitment, impacted on the overall financial position in this monitoring round. I will explain more about these centre items.

Members will recall that the Chancellor's 2012 autumn statement and 2013 UK Budget had implications for our budget position in this financial year. The impact on our RDEL was a reduction of £18.3 million, whilst there was an increase of £50.9 million in our CDEL. As I have already highlighted, the provisional out-turn position means that the Executive now plan to carry forward £29.9 million resource DEL and £12 million capital DEL under the Budget exchange scheme.

Members may also be aware that in February 2013 the Executive agreed proposals tabled by Minister Farry and Minister O'Dowd on educational maintenance allowances. The agreed way forward left a residual RDEL pressure of £3.4 million to be addressed in this monitoring round. There was also additional £8.5 million resource funding available due to lower RRI interest payment liabilities than anticipated when the Executive's four-year Budget was first agreed. This is primarily due to ongoing low interest rates charged by the National Loans Fund and the fact that the Executive borrowed some £45 million less in 2012-13 than originally planned. That was part of the flexibility that I negotiated in respect of the A5 road scheme.

Members will also recall that the Executive had previously set aside £13 million resource DEL to address the anticipated shortfall resulting from reform to the rates element of housing benefit. The pressure this year will now be £12.2 million and the balance of £0.8 million resource DEL was released for allocation in this

round. In total, taking into account all of these items resulted in an overcommitment of £24.9 million in resource expenditure and a significant £83.1 million of capital investment funding available for allocation in this round. This was before departmental reduced requirements were factored in, and I will detail those next.

Departments declared reduced requirements in this monitoring round of £15.3 million resource expenditure and £115.7 million capital investment. Full details are provided in the tables provided with this statement. The significant amount of capital funding surrendered was primarily because of the ongoing delay to the A5 road scheme. The reduced requirements also included £7 million capital DEL from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) in respect of baseline funding released through the replacement of conventional capital DEL with EU funding. This reflects use of part of the Titanic funding, which was removed from the EU programme in the 2012-13 financial year. Furthermore, the EU Titanic funding is now also expected to fund part of the A2 road project, and that will free up further capital DEL for the Executive. The exact figures have not yet been firmed up, but they are expected to be in the region of £5 million in this financial year and £8 million in 2014-15. I expect to be in a position to confirm these reduced requirements as part of the October monitoring round.

It is good practice that Departments seek to manage any emerging pressures within their existing allocations before bringing forward bids for additional allocations. The public expenditure control framework stipulates that internal departmental movements across spending areas in excess of the de minimis threshold require the Executive's approval. In this round, the Executive agreed just one such movement, and that is also detailed in the tables.

Departments may also, for a number of reasons, seek to reclassify expenditure from resource to capital or vice versa. All such reclassifications need Executive approval. They are also shown in the tables accompanying this statement. Departments may also, subject to Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) approval, seek to move budgets between the ring-fenced and non-ring-fenced RDEL categories. The impact of those moves is shown in the tables detailing the ring-fenced RDEL position.

All those adjustments impacted on the total amount of resources available to the Executive in this monitoring round. Once all those issues

were taken into account, the Executive had £193.6 million of capital DEL available to allocate but a residual overcommitment of £7.4 million on the resource DEL side. However, the Executive had a £71.3 million resource-to-capital reclassification built into their Budget position for 2013-14. That meant that the Executive had the capacity to reverse this switch, which would provide more RDEL at the expense of less CDEL.

As Members will be aware, it is not possible to utilise the available capital funding on taking forward new strategic capital projects in this financial year. That is because large, complex projects such as roads, hospitals and schools require significant lead-in time. The Executive, therefore, agreed that it would be a better use of resources to meet some of the high priority resource DEL pressures in this financial year. Therefore, the Executive agreed to reverse the £71.3 million resource-to-capital switch, which meant that the Executive had £63.8 million resource DEL and £122.4 million capital DEL.

We have now got to the bit that, I suppose, Members are most interested in. What did we do with the money once we got to that stage after switching it round, moving it round, reclassifying it and all the rest? Against the significant amount of funding available, Departments submitted bids totalling £179 million in respect of resource expenditure and £233.2 million in capital expenditure. The individual bids are also included in the tables that are attached to this statement. The Executive agreed allocations totalling £80.6 million on the resource side and £115.9 million on the capital side.

The individual allocations are detailed in the tables; therefore, I will highlight only some of the main ones. There was £59 million to the Department for Regional Development, of which nearly half was for additional roads structural maintenance. The allocation also ensures that DRD is now fully funded in compliance with the regulator's PC13 final determination in respect of Northern Ireland Water. There was also extra funding for new buses, which will attract £5.3 million of EU match funding and is replacing part of the Titanic funding in the EU programme.

The health service will also benefit from £54.5 million of additional funding. That will contribute towards ensuring that the Transforming Your Care reforms can continue and that our hospitals and medical equipment can be upgraded for the benefit of all who use our health service. The DHSSPS allocation also includes £12.5 million for energy-related

schemes that will attract EU match funding. That is also part of the package of projects that will replace the DETI Titanic project in the EU programme.

I am sure that Members will also welcome the boost to local economy of the £19 million allocated to DETI. That will ensure that Invest NI can fund additional selective financial assistance and R&D projects in its pipeline, and will also substantially boost Invest Northern Ireland's access to finance funds. The fact that DETI sought that additional funding provides another indication of emerging optimism in the local economy. The Executive will not hesitate to do all they can to boost jobs and growth in that area. The additional funding will also ensure that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board can maximise the opportunities arising from events such as the G8, City of Culture, World Police and Fire Games, and the Giro d'Italia.

There has been much focus on the cost of the G8 event. The most important thing is that we successfully delivered a safe and secure event, and, for that, I give my sincere thanks to the PSNI.

Of course, the event did not come for free, and, although the UK Government picked up the majority of the costs, the Executive provided some funding in the June monitoring round. The estimated G8 policing and security-related costs now stand at approximately £75 million. However, the UK Government have agreed to cover some £60 million of those costs. That leaves a balance of £14.5 million, which the Executive agreed to allocate to DOJ. In addition to the policing and security-related costs, there were some costs registered by Departments, including DETI, DRD and Health. Those amounted to some £5.1 million and funded road improvements around Enniskillen, a publicity campaign to maximise the economic benefits of the event and pressures on the Ambulance Service and the Fire and Rescue Service.

We must recognise that the G8 event has the potential to generate huge economic benefits for Northern Ireland. That is why the event will be followed by an investment conference in the autumn. Of course, we will not know the full economic benefits for years to come. However, a recent report by Barclays, for example, estimated that there could be significant net economic benefits in the short run, with potential for much greater long-term benefits for Northern Ireland.

The Executive also agreed to provide further help for new homeowners. This resulted in a

£10 million allocation to DSD for the co-ownership scheme, which remains oversubscribed. This will help an additional 200 new homeowners on to the property ladder and further boost our construction sector. The construction sector should also welcome the additional £5 million to DE for schools minor works.

The Executive also confirmed previous commitments in respect of the hardship scheme for farmers affected by the severe weather experienced in March and funding for local government reform. The allocation to DARD will enable hardship payments to be made to an estimated 1,250 farmers who lost livestock as a result of the severe weather experienced in March. The allocation to DOE will ensure that the review of public administration transition costs are adequately resourced.

In addition to the many allocations, the Executive agreed to set aside £17 million for the purchase of the Invest NI headquarters. Currently, Invest NI leases the building through a PFI contract. However, the incumbent company went into administration, and Invest NI can now buy back its headquarter building at a very competitive price. This would result in significant resource savings and should, therefore, represent a very good deal for Invest NI and the Executive. I hope to be able to confirm this allocation in the October monitoring round.

Members will be aware that the UK Government recently allocated ring-fenced financial transactions capital funding of £46.8 million in this year, with an additional £59.3 million in the next year. As I mentioned, last week's UK spending review provided a further £104.3 million financial transactions money in 2015-16. That can only be used for private sector loan or equity investment. My officials have been working with colleagues in other Departments and the SIB to develop schemes that may make use of this funding. To date, several emerging schemes have been put forward by Departments. However, it is a complex area, and a number of technical issues must be addressed before allocations can be made. The Executive, therefore, agreed that it would be premature to make significant allocations from this ring-fenced expenditure in this monitoring round.

There were, however, two schemes that were sufficiently developed to ensure that there should be actual spend in this financial year. The first was the agrifood loan scheme. I have mentioned this scheme a couple of times in the Assembly, and we have been working with

DETI, the banks and the agrifood industry on it. The scheme would ensure that our agrifood sector would be in a position to maximise the opportunity provided by a recent commitment by the major UK supermarkets to source more of their produce from the UK. The agrifood loan scheme would provide subordinated Executive loans of up to 40% of total build costs, with local banks providing the balance of funding. The scheme will, therefore, ensure that primary producers can obtain finance without providing full security. That is expected to unlock a significant number of projects that would contribute to substantial increases in output, employment and external sales from the local agrifood sector in the coming years. There would, of course, also be an immediate construction sector boost. The Executive agreed to provide £10 million of financial transactions funding to the scheme and that further funding would be committed in October, should there be completion of the contractual arrangements.

1.00 pm

The second scheme was the existing Get Britain Building initiative, which was launched in January. The Executive agreed to provide a further £7.2 million of financial transactions funding to the scheme. Furthermore, DSD is in the process of finalising two variations on the Get Britain Building housing schemes, and the Executive anticipate funding those in the October monitoring round.

I usually update the House on the latest position on the social investment fund and the childcare strategy, and this year is no different. Members will recall that, as part of Budget 2011-15, the Executive set aside £11 million resource and £15 million capital for the social investment fund in this financial year. The Executive also agreed, as part of the Budget realignment exercise, that Delivering Social Change projects should be funded from that centrally held fund. In addition, the Executive set aside £3 million resource for this year to fund childcare strategy initiatives.

A number of allocations under the Delivering Social Change banner were processed in this monitoring round, including £2 million resource to DHSSPS, £1 million resource to DE, £1.1 million resource to DSD and £0.5 million resource to OFMDFM. Furthermore, there were RDEL allocations from the childcare fund, which included £0.4 million to DHSSPS, £0.2 million to DCAL and £0.8 million to OFMDFM. There was also a transfer of £0.03 million RDEL to OFMDFM under the social investment fund. Since that funding is accessed from

existing central funds set aside by the Executive, those transactions were handled as technical transfers. The transfers mean that there is now £6.4 million resource DEL and £15 million capital DEL remaining in the social investment fund for 2013-14. Similarly, there is a residual £1.6 million resource DEL in the childcare strategy.

I want to inform Members of the approach that the Executive have agreed for the 2014 capital position, which has been subject to debate in the Chamber on a number of occasions. The background is that Minister Kennedy recently wrote to me indicating that the ongoing delay to the A5 road scheme was likely to free up capital DEL funding in the 2014-15 financial year. He also set out a number of road schemes that, he suggested, could be advanced in the next financial year to make use of any additional capital funding. Given that all significant capital projects have a considerable lead-in time, the Executive agreed that it would be helpful to consider, as early as possible and in a strategic manner, projects that may be advanced in 2014-15. Pending further consideration of all options and to ensure that valuable time is not lost, the Executive have agreed that the Regional Development Minister can proceed with the Magherafelt bypass project. The scheme, costing around £40 million, will address a key bottleneck on our road network, and the Executive's proactive approach sends a clear message of confidence to our construction sector at this difficult time. It is anticipated that work on the ground will start in the autumn of next year.

To ensure that all Ministers have an opportunity to put forward proposals, the Executive agreed that my officials would conduct an exercise over the summer seeking capital project proposals for the 2014-15 financial year. The outcome of that exercise will be brought to the Executive for consideration as part of the October monitoring round, and I will update the House on the outcome of our deliberations.

This June monitoring round has been complex, and the Executive have agreed total allocations of £196.5 million. We have also precommitted an additional £17 million of capital funding to be confirmed in the October monitoring round that has been allocated out of £17.2 million of financial transactions funding. Taking into account the £17 million of precommitted allocations, the Executive left this monitoring round with an overcommitment of £16.8 million of resource expenditure and an effective overcommitment of £10.5 million in capital expenditure. That is perfectly manageable at this stage of the financial year.

The allocations made in this round will provide a huge boost for our construction sector. We should welcome the additional funding for road structural maintenance, hospital maintenance and capital works, school maintenance, co-ownership and the financial transactions funding for the Get Britain Building scheme and the agrifood loan scheme. Indeed, those allocations, which will directly boost the construction sector, total £73 million.

The Executive's provision of further resources to Invest Northern Ireland to fund business growth here is good news for the local economy. The Executive's commitment to the agrifood loan scheme also has the potential to support significant growth in this sector, with all the wider economic benefits that that can bring. Our hospitals will also benefit from the injection of funding for the maintenance of the health estate and the purchase of new medical equipment. The allocations confirmed today will have a real and lasting impact on our local economy and on the public services delivered to the people of Northern Ireland. Therefore, I commend the June monitoring round to the Assembly — and thank you very much for the glass of water.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement and agree with him that some of the allocations are to be welcomed, particularly the hardship scheme payments that will affect some of my constituents.

The G8 costs outlined in the statement total almost £20 million, including £14.5 million to the Department of Justice and £5.1 million to DETI, DRD and the Health Department. What pressures might those costs create in those Departments? The public will want to know what the Department of Finance and Personnel's assessment is of the potential returns from that expenditure.

Mr Wilson: Before the G8 took place, considerable doubt was expressed about the cost of the event and its benefits to Northern Ireland. We always had the begrudgers, the naysayers and the whingers and the negative people looking for the bad news story from it. It has now been universally accepted that we put on a good show — even the weather helped us, for goodness' sake. It was the safest and the most secure G8, and there have already been benefits from it because of the publicity that we got.

Let us look at other places that have had to host the G8. The Scottish Executive, for example, got less than half of their total expenditure covered by central government. We have done very well out of the allocation made for the costs that we had to bear. I outlined the pressures on each of the Departments, which run to a maximum of £1 million or £2 million for any Department, apart from DOJ, to which we have allocated money. I believe that all Departments will be able to manage that within their existing budget.

Of course, we also wish to invest, and some of the money allocated today will be invested in exploiting the opportunities that will come from the G8. Independent surveys — the important thing is that they are independent — by Barclays and others indicate that there should be medium-term and long-term benefits. It is in our hands to exploit those in the future to ensure that we get the maximum return from the event.

Mr Weir: I thank the Minister for his detailed statement. Just to show that all politics is not parochial, has any consideration been given to funding the Armagh jail project, which has the potential to revitalise tourism in Armagh city?

Mr Wilson: There is no reference in the statement to the Armagh jail project. There was, however, a reference to it in the original statement. The original proposal that I made to the Executive contained a recommendation that we would, subject to a business plan, which you would expect, make an allocation to the Armagh jail project in the October monitoring round. It is a very important regeneration project, because, first, it is a historic building and, secondly, the project will provide hotel accommodation in Armagh, where there is a shortage. For some reason or other, Sinn Féin decided that it did not wish to have that recommendation in the statement. I have yet to receive an explanation of why it wanted it dropped. It was dropped because we could not get agreement to have it included in the monitoring round, but hopefully, over the next number of weeks, some of the party's councillors in the Armagh area, who, I understand, support the project, will bring some pressure on the party to make sure that it is included in the next monitoring round.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for his statement. I will go back to the reduced requirements. In last year's June monitoring

statement they amounted to £12 million in resource and £29 million in capital, compared with £15.3 million in resource and £115.7 million in capital this year. How confident is the Minister that what he has set out today indicates that all Departments have fully declared their reduced requirements at this time and that disproportionate amounts of money will not be handed back later in the year when there is less opportunity for them to be reallocated and fully utilised?

Mr Wilson: That is a constant theme that I come to in all these monitoring rounds. Obviously, at the beginning of the year, Departments sometimes have difficulty identifying whether there will be reduced requirements. I thank the Departments that, at an early stage, have indicated that there is some money that they will not be able to spend, because it means that we can reallocate it.

Before I came here this morning, I had a site meeting with some people from Roads Service. That helped to oil the wheels of the decision-making process for me, I hope, in getting a positive decision for my constituent. The point that Roads Service made to me was that getting money for structural maintenance and road maintenance at this time of the year was far more useful, because the work can be done in good weather and you can have more considered projects etc. That is the important thing.

The Member hit the nail on the head: the sooner we know that money will not be spent, the easier it will be to allocate it to good, sound and worthwhile projects instead of having an end-of-year rush. Even worse, if the money is not declared within all the monitoring rounds, we finish up with an underspend. That makes it more difficult to manage the money, because the limits of the budget exchange scheme are very narrow. The one thing that we want to avoid is giving money back to the Treasury. We have successfully avoided that, even though we had some very late underspends declared this year after the February monitoring round. We preach this message to Departments all the time. Hopefully, it will get across that, the sooner you declare reduced requirements, the better the money can be spent.

Mr Cree: I also thank the Minister for his public expenditure report, which is very good. It is particularly gratifying to see that no money was returned to Treasury.

I can see that there has been a problem with the PFI project for the headquarters of Invest

Northern Ireland. Will he assure us that that is not a change in policy? The intention was to go in the other way by realising assets and renting buildings.

On the local government side, is the £5 million transition cost all the money that is needed to make this thing go?

Mr Wilson: First, the Invest NI decision does not represent a change of policy or general direction: it is an example of where, with a bit of fancy footwork, we can solve a number of problems with one decision. We had an excess of capital that, for all the reasons that I gave, could not be spent, including long lead-in periods, a lot of capital returned to us and the Westminster Government emphasising more capital expenditure than resource expenditure, which meant that allocations came mostly in the form of capital allocations.

1.15 pm

Secondly, the opportunity arose to buy the building. The rent that we were paying comes from the resource budget, which is getting tighter and harder to find provision within. We had a golden opportunity to purchase the building using capital money and, in the long run, over the next 18 years of what would have been the lease, to save resource money. We estimate that we will save nearly £3 million a year compared with what we have been paying in rent. That is £3 million freed up in the resource DEL, which is where the pressures are at present and where they are likely to be for the foreseeable future. It is not a change in policy in the sense that we want to go back to owning buildings — the Member will know that there are good reasons for that — but an opportunity arose and all the circumstances came together. I think that we did the right thing in grasping that opportunity. The savings over the lease period amount to nearly £24 million of resource money.

As for the RPA transition costs, the figure is what the Executive decided to allocate, and the Minister of the Environment is happy with that. The Member will know, because we have talked about it before, that the costs include a wide range of things — capacity building and all the rest of it. Hopefully, that will smooth the progress of RPA so that it can take place, on timetable, next year.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement, and I commend other Ministers on their spending performance to date. What consideration has been given to the initial

resourcing of the Together: Building a United Community plans in this financial year?

Mr Wilson: As, I hope, I said at the start of the statement, one of the ways in which the Building a United Community project will be funded is through the additional borrowing powers that we have been given. I outlined the outcome of the spending review and the fact that, next year and the year after that, we will have the ability to borrow an extra £50 million a year. That is part of the way in which the programme will be financed. Obviously, if additional money is required — the Member will be well aware that the detail of the schemes has not yet been finalised — it will be up to OFMDFM to bid for it in next year's monitoring rounds.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister explain the internal reallocation of £2 million in his Department for equal pay?

Mr Wilson: That was to ensure that, should we have to pay out money to retired civil servants, we had allocated funds. The Abdulla ruling in Great Britain may have an impact on applications by retired civil servants in Northern Ireland. The allocation was a precautionary step to ensure that we had the money available to make payments.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome his announcement about the Magherafelt bypass. It is a good news story for the people of mid-Ulster and the Magherafelt District Council area, not just road users and local traders but the people in general. How long will the project take to complete?

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Member welcomes the announcement. His party and mine received some criticism because we did not support the populist motion that was debated in the Assembly a couple of weeks ago, which called for the funding of the Magherafelt bypass this year.

Of course, the reason for that, as he will well know, is that money cannot be spent on the Magherafelt bypass in this year. The vesting and procurement processes are still to be done. That is why I said in the statement that we expect work to start in autumn next year, not autumn this year.

So that there can be no further excuse by DRD for delaying preliminary work on the project, we have made it clear that money will be allocated. We are not allocating money; we are indicating

that money will be allocated when it is capable of being spent. Therefore, the Regional Development Minister does not have to drag his feet any longer on the scheme, and the scheme, which as the Member said is a very important scheme, can be provided.

I met the council and traders in Magherafelt four or five weeks ago. They explained the position to me and I saw it at first hand as we tried to drive through the town. I believe that this is an important strategic project that will actually help to free up a bottleneck and will maybe help the regeneration of the town centre.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for the statement. There are some good items and projects in it. I welcome particularly the roads structural maintenance increase and the Magherafelt bypass.

Does the Minister think that £10 million will be enough for the agrifood loan scheme? Does he hope to increase that amount later? What discussions has he had with the banks? The Agriculture Committee met the banks last week, and they were not that forthcoming in relation to their lending.

Mr Wilson: It is an initial allocation of £10 million. As I said in the statement, we will revisit it once we see how the scheme is progressing, whether we are getting all the necessary structures in place and what demand is like. I suspect that it will be much more than £10 million over the period. The opportunity lies over the next two or three years. If we miss the boat over that period, the supermarkets will source their produce from other places and we will have lost out. That was one reason why Arlene Foster and I felt we had to step in quickly.

It is not the end of the story; £10 million is the initial allocation. As we see what happens with demand and as we get the structures in place, more money can of course be made available. Given the difficulties that we have with financial transactions money, where we see a scheme such as this that can reap huge job benefits as well as having export potential, we will grasp it.

As far as the discussions with the banks are concerned, Arlene, representatives from the agrifood industry, and I, met all the major banks. They are working between themselves on the kinds of security issues they see. We believe that we have given them the ability to give loans to farmers who want, for example, to put up chicken or pig houses or whatever. We are taking some of the risk; up to 40% of the loan for any chicken house will be made

available through the loan scheme that we set up, and we will have the last call on it. So, the banks' risk is reduced there.

For the agrifood industry, the banks will be vetting farmers who are going to be suppliers. Therefore, they will know that they are capable of doing the job and maybe even have a track record. Of course, the agrifood industry will bear some of the ongoing cost, because it supplies the grain, etc. If a business fails, because you need to have the supply of chickens, there is always the possibility of taking over and running the thing themselves.

The banks are actually getting quite a good deal out of this. If they were to baulk at this, I think we would then be able to say that, despite all the rhetoric about lending, we do not see that reality on the ground. I do not want to be critical because I want to get them on board with the scheme. They were more than happy to come to a meeting. They said that they would go away and work at this themselves and come back to us. I am hoping that, in the very near future, we will have some positive results from that.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his statement. I, too, welcome the setting aside of money for the Magherafelt bypass. I know that my colleague beside me is very keen for that project to happen. Minister, continuing on from the last question, how important do you see the agrifood loan scheme being to the growth of that sector?

Mr Wilson: I see it as being very important. I cannot remember how many million more chickens and pigs need to be produced every year. However, if we are to meet the demand that the supermarkets will have, something has to happen quickly. Most of the farmers who will be involved cannot give the kind of security required. Do not forget that, once you have built a chicken house, you have a chicken house and you cannot use it for anything else. The banks argue that those are really worth nothing if they are not used to produce chickens, hence the degree of risk. If you are to get chicken houses built fairly quickly, you have to put in the finance quickly. You cannot hum and haw and say that it is too risky and that we need more security and have long, protracted negotiations about loans. It has to be done within a very short period. We believe that by de-risking the project in this way — or partly de-risking it, as we carry some of the risk by taking on 40% of the loan and being the last people to be repaid — we will assist the very rapid growth of that part of the supply chain.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his statement. How will the end-year flexibility affect further education colleges in continuing to play a key role in kick-starting our economy?

Mr Wilson: The problem with further education colleges, and the reason why we have had to introduce this end-year flexibility, is that when further education colleges were independent, stand-alone entities, they could manage their own budgets. Now, their budgets have to work on the financial year cycle. As the Member will know from his experience, the school year is not the same as the financial year, and, therefore, a college might find that it has not spent all its money by April or the end of March because there is still part of the college year to run. If that money is not spent, it is declared as an underspend, which has an impact on us. If that accumulates across all the colleges, it causes a problem.

We have done the same thing that we did with schools. If the college has unspent money at the end of the year, that is held by my Department under end-year flexibility. The relevant Department then bids for it again in the June monitoring round so that it can be allocated to the colleges. The colleges do not need to have it all spent or rush to spend it at the end of the financial year, leaving themselves with that gap between April and the start of the next college year in September. That works very well for schools. Indeed, schools have been able to keep saving at the rate at which they have always done, so that they have resources available for one-off expenses or whatever. I have no doubt that it will work just as well for further education colleges.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for his statement and apologise for being late for the start of it. Given the length of his answers, I thought that the Minister had turned into another Minister; that is Mr Attwood, by the way.

To what extent has the budget exchange scheme assisted in the better financial management that the provisional outcome illustrates?

Mr Wilson: The budget exchange scheme enables us to carry some money forward. We manage our budgets very well. As I said, what we have done this year is the equivalent of somebody on an average income having only 97p left at the end of the month. We have kept spending very tight. Nevertheless, you will always have situations in which not all the

money is spent. Before the budget exchange scheme, we had either to find ways of frittering that money away or give it back to the Treasury. As a result of the budget exchange scheme, we now have that flexibility. It is quite tight; nevertheless, we have the flexibility to carry about £60 million a year over from one year to the next. We have not had to do that this year, but that gives us the ability, in the June monitoring round, to consider how best to spend that money rather than rushing in February and saying, "Just spend it on anything; get rid of it", which, of course, is not a good way of managing money in any circumstances.

1.30 pm

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. The DUP can spin its refusal to support the Ulster Unionists' recent motion on road improvements all it likes, but we did not mention in our motion that the money had to be spent in this year.

I welcome the statement. Will the Minister confirm that my colleague the Regional Development Minister has won the argument on starting the construction of the Magherafelt bypass and that funds have now been set aside to move through vesting and on to procurement? Furthermore, will the Minister commit his support to the policy idea of the 10% top-up compensation, similar to the policy in GB, for landowners who are required to release land?

Mr Wilson: First, we do not spin when it comes to projects; we deliver. That is the important thing. The First Minister and I went to Magherafelt and saw the situation. Long before there was any debate in this Assembly, I had spoken to the council and the traders, and the First Minister had spoken to, I think, the traders in Magherafelt. We have had representations from our Assembly Members in the area, and a conscious decision was made to deliver on that important project. So, let us make it quite clear what happened with that situation.

The Member is maybe trying to rewrite history when she talks about not wanting the money spent in this year. In fact, the whole point of the debate was to try to ensure that money was allocated in this year, even though it could not be spent this year. Indeed, I was in somebody's house the other night, and I read an article in the 'Mid-Ulster Mail' or whatever it happened to be and thought, "What is this all about?" The statement had been written at that stage, Mr Speaker, just in case anyone thinks I

was influenced by the paper. The question was quite clearly this: why is the money not being given now? The money is not being given now because the money cannot be spent now. Let us make something clear: the Minister always had the ability to start the work on that road scheme. Let us not fall out about it, but let us get the people of Magherafelt the road scheme that they need and that will be important for them.

The Member asked about the 10% top-up compensation. Members always refer to what happens in other parts of the United Kingdom, but the compensation scheme in other parts of the United Kingdom is different from the one that is available in Northern Ireland. If Members want the legislation changed so that we replicate the compensation scheme from other parts of the United Kingdom, landowners would face certain losses compared with what they have under the scheme here. It is swings and roundabouts. Before we go down that route, Members ought to bear in mind that although we do not have the 10% top-up, if people's houses are affected, they have the 10% for home loss and disturbance. We also have different elements of the scheme that do not pertain in the rest of the United Kingdom. Overall, people do just as well.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. Can he confirm whether there is still the same enthusiasm or lack of enthusiasm in the Executive for the A5 scheme?

Mr Wilson: The Executive have committed themselves to building the A5. The problem was not an Executive decision but a decision of the courts and the group of people who lobbied against the building of the scheme. You could perhaps argue that DRD could have covered the planning aspects more fully than it did. Nevertheless, we are where we are, and the Executive commitment is still that, once planning permission has been granted for the scheme, the scheme will go ahead. Of course, we will have to find the resources for it.

Mr Swann: Minister, you said that you will task your officials, over the summer, to seek capital project proposals for the 2014-15 financial year. Will you still give the same commitment for the A26 so that that can be brought forward as soon as possible as well?

Mr Wilson: The point of having a review of all capital projects is that, given the significant amount of capital money that we have, we want to ensure that it is spent on the highest priorities. Other Departments will have

priorities as well. Indeed, in the Budget debate, I heard Members from Mr Swann's party talk about capital priorities that they see and which they would like to see financed over the period of this year's Budget, let alone next year's Budget. I do not want to presume what the outcome of the review of capital projects will be, but I have no doubt that the Minister for Regional Development will be putting the roads projects forward, less the Magherafelt one, which we have now said that we will fund out of next year's money anyway. I am sure that the Health Minister will have, under Transforming Your Care, some health proposals. Indeed, he was at a meeting with me on Friday where we were talking about health priorities in the Northern Trust area, which will require capital expenditure. All those things will go into the pot, and decisions will be made. Resources will be available, and the decisions will be made on the basis of which projects are the highest priority.

Mr McAleer: Minister, your statement indicates that the £40 million allocated to the Magherafelt bypass will come out of the A5 budget for the 2014-15 financial year. Can you confirm that the Executive have made that decision? There is a view in the west that the A5 will be well under way in 2014.

Mr Wilson: This statement has been approved by the Executive, so it is an Executive decision. That is the only reason why it is here today. As I said, parts of this statement were left out because they did not get approval, including a part about Armagh jail. Anything that is in the statement has Executive approval. As far as the question of what roads expenditure will take place in 2014-15 is concerned, all the indications from the Minister for Regional Development are that, at the very least, it will be the middle of the year before the outcome of the planning application and the process for the A5 is known. On that basis, there will be a considerable amount of A5 money that cannot be spent — if any of it is spent — in the next financial year.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for the statement and the work on his part that has gone into bringing forward these allocations. The public will want some more answers about the £75 million in G8 capital costs. I commend the Minister that Northern Ireland has a better deal than Scotland got when the G8 was hosted there, but can he assure the House that the capital costs that went into the G8 project will be able to be used in future policing operations and that this was not a one-off cost? Can he

assure us that there will be a long-term benefit to the police from what they bought?

Secondly, in future monitoring rounds, the Department of Justice will bid again for the Prison Service exit scheme. A small number of officers are waiting to be able to leave the service, and that will finally draw a line under this scheme, which has allowed in the region of 500 officers to be able to leave the service in recognition of the work that they carried out during the darkest times of our Troubles.

Mr Wilson: I will take the second point first. The Executive have, of course, been generous in the allocations to the exit scheme for prison officers. Indeed, in the January monitoring round, we allocated a substantial amount of money. Even after the January monitoring round, when it became clear that Departments would declare some underspends that had not been identified in the January monitoring round, we made a further allocation. The resource end of the budget is always tight, but it is open to the Justice Minister to apply for future moneys for the scheme. It is an invest-to-save scheme, but there will be other competing pressures. However, those two allocations were made at the end of the last financial year.

We fought hard with the Treasury over the policing costs for the G8 summit. Although there was expenditure in paying for police officers to come from other parts of the United Kingdom, to kit them out, to look after them and all the consumables for any such security operation, the Treasury made the point that some of the expenditure was intended for capital equipment, such as surveillance equipment, drones, and so on. Those will not disappear now that the G8 has gone, and they are not redundant. That capital equipment will be available to the police and should, therefore, be part of the normal budget.

The Member makes an important point. It is not as though we paid out this money and there are no long-lasting benefits. Part of our allocation for the security costs was for equipment that the police may or may not have purchased anyway but that they were able to purchase in advance because of the G8 summit. They will be able to use it over the next number of years as part of the normal security equipment that helps them to detect crime and to catch criminals.

Executive Committee Business

Financial Provisions Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 22/11-15] be agreed.

This short Bill handles a number of routine financial matters that have no impact on the overall quantum of government expenditure in Northern Ireland. Financial provisions Bills are routine in nature and are required at intervals to deal with minor and/or non-controversial amendments to governing legislation.

On this occasion, the Bill contains six provisions. Clause 1 is a repeal, in its entirety, of the Development Loans (Agriculture and Fisheries) Act (Northern Ireland) 1968. Under that Act, loans were made available at competitive commercial rates of interest for a wide range of agricultural purposes, such as the purchase of livestock, seeds and fertilisers, and the improvement of farm dwellings and buildings. Given the lessening demand for loans and the need to reduce government expenditure, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) ceased to accept those loan applications at the end of November 1979. There is no principal outstanding, and all the loans advanced to the agricultural loan fund from the Consolidated Fund have been paid in full. The legislation is no longer required and needs to be repealed.

Clause 2 seeks to amend the Harbours Act (Northern Ireland) 1970 to permit the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to provide grant-in-aid to the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA). The Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority is an executive non-departmental public body (NDPB) sponsored by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. Its duties include the improvement, management and maintenance of the three fishery harbours and harbour estates of Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie. Up to now, the Fishery Harbour Authority has generally been able to meet its operational costs from the revenues it generates, but in recent years, as a result of factors largely beyond the authority's control, it is becoming more difficult to achieve break-even consistently on an annual basis. Should the position arise that the authority

regularly incurs an annual operating deficit, DARD wishes to be in a position to provide grants to cover the deficit.

I am advised that the authority has already introduced a number of policies to reduce operating costs and is seeking further efficiency savings. However, the environment in which the authority operates — one of reduced fishing opportunities and fluctuating prices — makes it difficult to forecast changes in revenue, and that, coupled with consistent pressure from stakeholders to keep charges as low as possible, makes the authority's trading performance uncertain. As a result, DARD wishes to have the authority to provide support if it is judged necessary to do so.

1.45 pm

Clause 3 amends the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 to enable the Court Funds Office (CFO) interest rates to be adjusted by way of departmental direction. The Court Funds Office is responsible for the management of funds held in court, mainly on behalf of minors and patients who are deemed incapable of managing their affairs. The interest rate applied to those funds can be adjusted only by way of a new statutory rule, which can take between eight to 12 weeks to become operational. Funds are held in accounts that earn interest in accordance with the Bank of England base rates. The difference between the base rate and CFO rates can, therefore, lead either to a surplus or a deficit on the accounts. Although the CFO can recover any deficit from the Consolidated Fund protecting the funds held for individuals, it is preferable to adjust the rates as soon as possible. The proposed provision will allow CFO to react quickly to changes in the Bank of England base rate and is in line with practice in England and Wales.

Clause 4 amends the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 to provide the Housing Executive with statutory power to charge for its administration and transaction costs associated with general discretionary land transactions. Under article 88 of the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1981, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has statutory authority to dispose of any land held by it that is not required for social housing. Many of those parcels of land are small inconsequential sites with limited market value and are often sold to the owners of adjacent houses or are sites for development as garden extensions, garages or informal open spaces. For each piece of land sold, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive incurs administration and transaction costs but

does not have the specific statutory authority to charge the purchaser for those costs. That often means that, in the current economic climate, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and, therefore, the public purse, are effectively making a loss on many of the small parcels of land that it sells, especially those sold by private treaty. Clause 4 seeks authority, along the lines of section 93 of the Local Government Act 2003, to charge for discretionary services.

Clause 5 amends article 4(d) of the Audit and Accountability (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 in line with the corresponding reference in the Health and Social Care (Reform) Act (Northern Ireland) 2009. The clause will update the definition of a relevant NHS body for the purposes of the Comptroller and Auditor General's data-matching powers. The current position is that, because of the change in definitions, the C&AG, although able to request patient data from Northern Ireland health bodies for a data-matching exercise, can no longer disclose the results. That effectively means that patient data cannot be used in data-matching exercises for the purpose of assisting in the prevention and detection of fraud.

The sixth and final clause establishes the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) and the Northern Ireland Police Fund (NIPF) as statutory bodies. Establishing those organisations in legislation is purely a technical amendment consequential to their transfer from the Northern Ireland Office under the devolution of policing and justice and is necessary to provide a proper legal authority for the Department of Justice to fund them. The matter has been discussed with my Department and the Northern Ireland Audit Office and, in keeping with other arm's-length bodies, it is agreed that a statutory basis for both organisations is required.

In short, Mr Speaker, the Bill provides for a number of routine financial provisions, and I commend it to the Assembly.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for explaining the general principles of this exciting legislation. The Committee recognises that its purpose is to deal with routine financial matters such as minor amendments to governing legislation or regularising an existing practice. It also understands that the legislation is normally required at intervals of every two or three years to adjust statutory limits and handle other routine financial issues, and it is regarded as semi-routine. In that regard, the Department

explained that it occasionally surveys Departments, the Audit Office and other bodies to identify any finance-related legislation that needs to be updated or amended, and it gathers those small amendments into a single Bill.

The Department indicated its intention to compile a draft Financial Provisions Bill during 2012, but, due to a reprioritising of the Department's legislative programme, that was delayed. A total of six items were considered suitable for inclusion in the Bill, and the Minister referred to them.

At the Committee's meeting on 22 May 2013, members agreed to seek initial comments from the relevant Assembly Committees about the Bill's applicable provisions. We also wrote to the Department to request clarification on whether powers to access Harbour Commissioners' reserves will be provided for in the Bill. It was since clarified that that has already been delegated to the Budget review group.

The Committee received a pre-introductory policy briefing from departmental officials on the background to the Bill and the approach that was taken when consulting with other Departments. By that time, the Committee for Social Development and the Public Accounts Committee had indicated that they were generally content with the Bill proposals at that stage. Members agreed during that meeting to seek clarification from the Department about any amendments that may be tabled to the Bill.

The Committee further agreed to highlight a number of pertinent issues to the Justice, Regional Development and Social Development Committees. Since the policy briefing, the Committee has received notification from the Department that the Minister intends to bring forward two amendments to the Bill at Consideration Stage, both relating to rating legislation. Although the Committee is still to receive an oral briefing on the details of those amendments, I understand that one is technical in nature and will clarify current provision of the ability of Land and Property Services to request effective dates for occupation. The second amendment will seek to extend the current discount that is allowed for early payment of rates for occupied and unoccupied dwellings.

The Committee looks forward to a briefing in early September from departmental officials on the substance of those amendments, and it will scrutinise them accordingly, subject to the Bill's being referred to Committee Stage today. The Committee has also been advised by the

Agriculture Committee that it has considered correspondence from DARD on the rationale for including the relevant provisions in the Bill. The Agriculture Committee indicated that it is content that the provisions be included.

Overall, the Finance Committee was generally satisfied with the briefing and clarification that the Department provided, and members will further engage with officials and other stakeholders on the details of the Bill during Committee Stage. In the meantime, I support the principles of the Bill.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. There is a quotation from Shakespeare, which, I think, comes from 'Hamlet':

"More honour'd in the breach than the observance."

The Bill is probably more interesting for what is excluded from it rather than for what it includes. What the Chairman said sparked off an observation, which is that one item that is missing from the Bill, and which I expected at one time might have formed part of a Bill, is the £40 million from the Harbour Commissioners, which was to be a contribution to the budgetary position. After that announcement had been made, it was realised that legislation would be necessary to release that money, and I expected that arrangements would be made. Subsequently, it emerged that legislation was not being brought forward and that an arrangement had been made between DRD and the Harbour Commissioners that industrial space would be made available to Invest NI in the harbour area. I am not quite sure of the value of the space that has been made available and whether it matches up to the £40 million. So, I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether he agrees that this is an important revenue-raising asset that should be brought within the Executive's control through DRD and whether he will consider it for inclusion in a future financial provisions Bill.

Mr Cree: The Minister has set the scene fairly well, but it is good to see that these miscellaneous pieces of legislation are being regularised in such a Bill. As the Minister said, the Bill is largely technical in nature and deals with routine matters, and I think that it is non-controversial.

I understand that a Bill of this nature is usually brought forward every two or three years, with the last coming into effect on 15 December 2009. I also understand that the Bill was due to

come forward during last year. However, as happens all too frequently in some Departments, we were faced with a delay. I am pleased that we have got to the stage at which the Bill is before the House.

The legislation that we are considering today includes a number of provisions, which the Minister outlined. All are considered to be non-contentious. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will mention a few issues. First, I welcome clause 6, which will allow the Northern Ireland Police Fund and the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust to have a statutory footing. The police fund was created to help injured officers — serving and retired — and their families, as well as police widows. The Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust is an organisation to look after ex-RUC officers. It provides retraining in trade, as well as psychological and physiotherapy backup and rehabilitation. It is therefore vital that the Department of Justice have the statutory power to fund both those organisations in the essential work that they do.

Secondly, I want to deal directly with the issue of empowering the Housing Executive to charge the purchaser of land from it for any administration and transition costs relating to that sale. I would be grateful if the Minister can give some overview of the administration and transaction costs that the Housing Executive currently bears, in order to gain some sense of how that provision will affect its budget.

Finally, I welcome the fact that there will be consistency between accounts and audits of the Health and Social Care bodies, as outlined in clause 5. That is necessary to enable the Comptroller and Auditor General to carry out the required scrutiny and accountability function. It also facilitates ease of reference with the rest of the United Kingdom. The Committee will of course be looking at those issues in further detail, as well as at the other measures in the Bill, in due course.

Mr Wilson: I thank all the Members who took the opportunity to make their contributions in this short debate today. Obviously, as the Bill moves on — if it passes its Second Stage, which I have no doubt it will — it will go to the Committee for further scrutiny.

The Committee Chairman raised an issue about the amendments to the Rates Order and the reasons for those. We want to make two changes to the Rates Order. The first concerns early payment discount for empty homes. The current legislation does not provide for that, and Members will know that where early payment is

made, a 4% discount is available. The purpose of the amendment would be to enable that discount to be extended to those who have empty homes and are paying rates on them. We estimate that around 18% of people who own empty homes will take up the discount, and the cost to the overall rate income will be about £250,000.

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

The second change is to require additional information about ownership. As the legislation stands, occupiers are held liable for rates. We need to be aware of when there has been a change in circumstances. The current legislation empowers the Department to require information from owners and occupiers for the purpose of determining their liability in accessing the rate, but the important thing is that those requirements do not include the dates of an ownership change. Of course, the Department and LPS have found it increasingly difficult to get information on that and to establish when liability starts for some dwellings. The purpose of the change will be to require, as part of the information supplied to LPS, any information about the specific date on which a person's interest in the property has begun.

2.00 pm

Mr Cree raised the issue of the power for the Housing Executive to charge for the legal and administrative costs, etc, of the transfer of small parcels of land. That is one issue about which, I have got to say, I have some concern. I hope that the Committee will drill down into it.

As I said in my speech, the Housing Executive currently sells small parcels of land quite frequently. I am sure that many in the Chamber have had occasions when someone has come to us and said that people are dumping on the bit of ground beside their house all the time; that youngsters are playing on it and breaking down a hedge; or that it has become a bit of an eyesore and is not being looked after properly. The person will say that they would like to take that bit of ground into the curtilage of their house, as part of the garden, or that they could build a garage or shed on it, for example. Those transactions are quite common for the Housing Executive. In 2010-11, it actually sold 108 such parcels of land. The transactions are usually fairly small in monetary terms; around £1,500 on average per piece of land sold. However, the transaction costs, which, at present, the Housing Executive bears and does

not pass on to the purchaser, usually, amount to around £2,500.

The question that I would ask is whether those transaction costs are unrealistically high. Is that amount of administration necessary? Is it cost effective? Is it being done in the most cost-effective way? If there is a cost for the sale of land, of course, the person who wants to purchase the land ought to pay it. It should not be borne by the Housing Executive. In the future, that would be the result of that provision. I have asked whether it is a realistic cost or whether it is over-inflated and that overheads are far too high, and whether something be done to bring them down.

The Member asked what the implication would be. That is the implication: it would more than double the average price of a piece of land sold by the Housing Executive to a private individual. It is something that I hope will be examined when the Bill goes through.

I thank the Committee Chairman for his remarks and Members for the interest that they have taken. I trust that the Assembly will pass the Bill's Second Stage, so that it can go to the Committee for further scrutiny.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 22/11-15] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we move on, I have been asked to point out that the clock at the back of the Chamber is five minutes slow, which, I am sure, is no reflection on Members.

Pensions Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of clause 41 of the Pensions Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 9 May 2013, relating to the preparation of guidance for pensions illustrations.

The Westminster Pensions Bill, which is currently before the House of Commons, provides for the introduction of a single-tier state pension and consequential matters; the acceleration of the increase in state pension

age to 67; the introduction of a bereavement support payment; and miscellaneous changes in respect of private pensions.

Whilst not directly related to today's motion, subject to Executive approval, I anticipate bringing forward an Assembly Pensions Bill in due course. I am sure that we can look forward to some interesting debates, but that is for the future. Today, I am seeking the Assembly's agreement specifically to extend to Northern Ireland clause 41 of the Westminster Bill, which relates to the preparation of guidance for pensions illustrations. That measure requires the approval of the Assembly, as it affects matters that fall within the transferred field.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I explain the background to the provision. Defined contribution pensions schemes must provide scheme members with an annual pensions projection known as a statutory money purchase illustration. In doing so, they are required by law to comply with technical guidance issued by the Financial Reporting Council. Under the Companies (Audit, Investigations and Community Enterprise) Act 2004, regulatory functions of the Financial Reporting Council are exempt from liability for damages arising from those activities. That provision is of UK extent. The understanding was that the technical guidance on statutory money purchase illustrations was caught within that exemption under the umbrella of "actuarial standards" work. However, doubts have arisen as to whether the technical guidance is caught by that term.

Clause 41 puts the matter beyond doubt by specifically including the issue of guidance for pensions illustrations in section 16 of the 2004 Act. The amendment comes into force two months after Royal Assent to the Westminster Bill, and it is important that the law in relation to the Financial Reporting Council's functions is clarified as soon as possible. Clause 41, therefore, proposes a minor technical change to clarify the current law. It does not represent a policy change and does not alter how the statutory money purchase illustrations operate or the council's function in relation to them.

In conclusion, this is not a policy change. It merely clarifies the existing law in relation to a UK-wide body — the Financial Reporting Council. Extending clause 41 to Northern Ireland allows us to achieve legal certainty with the minimum of delay on this somewhat technical issue.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go

raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank the Minister for bringing this legislative consent motion to the Assembly. The Minister outlined that this is essentially a technical provision and is designed to clarify the law, as opposed to changing any substantive policy issue, by extending to here an amendment to clause 41 of the Pensions Bill.

The Committee was briefed by the Department and informed that the Financial Reporting Council issues guidance relating to annual pension projections, which are provided to members of defined pension contribution pension schemes. Under existing legislation, the regulatory activities of the Financial Reporting Council are exempt from liability from damages arising from those activities. The Committee was informed that there are some doubts as to whether that guidance is caught under the term "actuarial guidance" and therefore covered by the exemption. The legislative consent motion will provide clarification on that issue and put it beyond doubt.

The Committee recognises that that should be clarified as soon as possible, and the Pensions Bill offers the earliest opportunity to do that. On that basis, the Committee recommends that the Assembly endorse the legislative consent motion.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Chair of the Social Development Committee for his contribution. Clause 41 will clarify the legislation relating to guidance for pension illustrations and will help to ensure that the important work carried out by the Financial Reporting Council continues as intended. I believe that it is in everyone's interest that the law across the United Kingdom is clarified without delay.

I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of clause 41 of the Pensions Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 9 May 2013, relating to the preparation of guidance for pensions illustrations.

Mesothelioma Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Mesothelioma Bill.

The Mesothelioma Bill was introduced at Westminster on 9 May 2013. The Bill addresses an issue that has affected and will continue to affect many people here in Northern Ireland, many of whom are known to Members of this House. Diffuse mesothelioma is a devastating disease that is caused almost exclusively by exposure to asbestos, usually in the course of employment. Each year, around 2,400 people die from mesothelioma across the United Kingdom, and the numbers are expected to peak in the next five years. There are around 40 deaths a year from diffuse mesothelioma in Northern Ireland. At its core, the Mesothelioma Bill is about ensuring that financial help and support gets to those who need it most and who otherwise would not have any access to civil compensation. It aims to avoid the delays associated with tracing a liable employer, and will mean that sufferers will receive payments as quickly as possible at a time when they most need it.

The Bill makes provision for the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme, which was announced by the Westminster Government on 25 July 2012 in their response to consultation by the Department for Work and Pensions on supporting people who need to trace employers' liability insurance. By way of background, under the Employers' Liability (Compulsory Insurance) Act 1969, most employers carrying on business in Great Britain are required to insure their liability to their employees for bodily injury or disease sustained in the course of their employment. Corresponding provision is made for Northern Ireland in the Employer's Liability (Defective Equipment and Compulsory Insurance) (Northern Ireland) Order 1972.

In the case of employer negligence, the majority of individuals are able to make a claim for injury or disease against their current or former employer, or, where their employer no longer exists, they can claim against the relevant employer's liability insurer. However, in the case of diffuse mesothelioma, the disease may not appear until decades after exposure to the asbestos but, once diagnosed, it is rapidly terminal. Sufferers rarely live more than two years after diagnosis and there is no known

cure. By the time of diagnosis, a person's employer may have ceased trading or the relevant insurance records may have been lost or destroyed. In these circumstances, the individuals concerned may be unable to recover compensation.

At present, it can take up to two years from someone being diagnosed with mesothelioma to receiving compensation. All too often, people with mesothelioma have died or are in the advanced stages of the disease before any payment is made.

The Mesothelioma Bill was introduced to address the issue of those who were negligently exposed by their employer to asbestos and were diagnosed with diffuse mesothelioma on or after 25 July 2012 but are unable to recover compensation.

The Bill makes provision for the establishment of a scheme to make payments to people with diffuse mesothelioma and dependants of people who have died from this disease before they could make an application to the scheme. The payment scheme is to be funded by a levy on insurance companies that are authorised to provide employers' liability insurance. The amount of the levy to be paid by each insurer will be determined by reference to the insurer's market share during the relevant period. The Bill also provides for the establishment of a technical committee to decide disputes about whether an employer maintained employers' liability insurance with an insurer at a particular time.

Regulation of financial services, such as insurance companies, is a matter that lies outside the legislative competence of the Assembly, and it is appropriate for Westminster to legislate in that area. However, the rights and duties of employers and employees are devolved matters, which means that the Mesothelioma Bill cannot apply to Northern Ireland unless the Assembly gives its consent. I am therefore seeking the Assembly's agreement to the extension of the Bill, and thereby the payment scheme, to Northern Ireland.

I can reassure members that the Bill has no significant financial implications for Northern Ireland as the cost of the scheme will be met by insurance companies required to contribute to the levy. This will involve a small number of major national and international insurers, and I understand that the scheme is unlikely to have any financial impact on any local businesses.

2.15 pm

In summary, I welcome the introduction of the Mesothelioma Bill at Westminster and the fact that it will be extended to Northern Ireland. It is essential that people here who are suffering from diffuse mesothelioma and their dependants are in a position to avail themselves of the benefits provided by the diffuse mesothelioma payment scheme.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for bringing the legislative consent motion (LCM) to the Assembly this afternoon.

The introduction of the LCM will ensure that people here who have been diagnosed with mesothelioma do not lose out on a beneficial scheme that will speed up the delivery of compensation payments. Although broadly endorsing the LCM, the Committee wishes to express concern that, if a person has been diagnosed with mesothelioma and is in receipt of benefits as a result of that diagnosis, the benefit that has been paid is subsequently deducted from the lump sum compensation payment. The Committee has raised that concern with the Department, and it acknowledges that, because it is the aim to speed up the delivery of the lump sum compensation payment, the actual deductions should not be that great. However, the Committee felt that, as a point of principle, given that that does not happen with other compensation payments, it needed to note that and inform the House.

Fundamentally, the Committee welcomes the introduction of the LCM as, due to the nature of the disease, which the Minister outlined graphically earlier, the prognosis for sufferers is not good. It is, therefore, vital that compensation payments are made as quickly as possible following any claim application. The Committee sees the introduction of the LCM as a positive development that will offer some positive outcome to those diagnosed with mesothelioma and their families in what would, inevitably, be a very difficult and traumatic time. With that, on behalf of the Committee, I recommend that the Assembly endorses this legislative consent motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I speak not as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development but as an MLA for Newry and Armagh. I, too, welcome the Mesothelioma Bill. It is good that people who suffer from that horrendous disease have finally received recognition.

Reiterating what the Chair said, I, too, have reservations about the fact that benefit will be deducted from compensation for people who received that benefit as a result of suffering from the disease, obviously through no fault of their own. Going back to compensation recovery for other conditions and accidents, that is not the case because, essentially, the compensation has been raised to take into account the fact that benefits have been paid for the particular condition or accident. Unfortunately, in this case, that has not happened. Although we have been told that it will affect only a relatively small number of people here in the North, the fact is that it is a general principle that should not really be applied. We had a presentation in the Senate Chamber last week around all this. I could not get a particularly satisfactory explanation from the people involved, but they said that they would take it back to Westminster and look at it. It is unfair, and I just wanted to put that on record.

Mr McCausland: I thank the two Members for their contributions to the debate. I thank the Chair for his general support for the legislative consent motion. With the one qualification, I think that there is broad agreement across the Chamber for the proposal to extend the Mesothelioma Bill to Northern Ireland. It is vital that local people are not excluded from the benefits of the legislation.

I acknowledge the concern about the potential recovery of social security benefits from scheme payments. I understand, from what the Member said that officials said, that it is something that they will take away and look at. It may well be the case that it is something that we are bound by. Nevertheless, it is important that we move ahead with this. The scheme will ensure that sufferers who are unable to trace a solvent employer or insurer can have access to a range of support, including access to compensation.

That is, without doubt, a better situation for those suffering from mesothelioma than not having access to the scheme or any civil compensation. Under the new scheme, it is expected that around 300 people a year from across the United Kingdom could receive an average payment of approximately £100,000 each.

I want to offer some reassurance to Members about the recovery of benefits from scheme payments that only those benefits that are paid directly because of and relating to the diagnosis of mesothelioma can be recouped. It is envisaged that, in practice, there will be a very

limited period between the date of diagnosis of diffuse mesothelioma, when an individual would be able to claim relevant benefits, and that individual being able to receive payment under the scheme.

As I said, payments from the proposed scheme should be made much more quickly than the current 16 months to two years it takes for a legal claim to be settled. Under the scheme, it is envisaged that sufferers will usually receive payments within three to five months of making a claim. So, the amount of any relevant benefit paid from the date of diagnosis until the time that a scheme payment is made is likely to be very small. Therefore, it is unlikely that any significant contribution would ever be made from a compensation payment.

I thank Members for their support and seek approval for the legislative consent motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Mesothelioma Bill.

Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, I might have to interrupt proceedings for Question Time. However, that depends on you.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I will keep you guessing, Mr Deputy Speaker. I beg to move

That the draft Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

The regulations are made under sections 15 to 17 and section 24 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, which stipulates that they must be laid in draft form and approved by a resolution of the Assembly. The purpose of the draft regulations is to require existing councils to work together to establish statutory transition committees (STCs), which will be bodies corporate for the new local government districts. Let me make it very clear: moving to STCs was a very strong view at a political level within and outside the Chamber. It is an example of creating certainty and deepening

political authority in the rundown to the review of public administration (RPA), which is only 700 days away.

The regulations will require statutory transition committees to hold their first meetings within 35 days of the date on which the regulations come into operation, which is anticipated to be this week. Each committee will be permitted to have up to 16 members, with equal representation from their predecessor councils. That means that the STCs should meet in and around and no later than 7 August.

There are exceptions about the make-up of the STCs. The STC for the new district of Causeway Coast and Glens will have up to 20 members, given that four councils are merging, and the STC for the new district of Belfast will have no more than 25 councillors, given the size of the Belfast district. Belfast will be joined by two councillors each from Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council, since parts of their council districts are joining Belfast. With the exception of Belfast, all statutory transition committees will contain equal representation from each of the constituent councils. Under guidance, it was decided that the councillors who are joining the Belfast STC from the two sister councils will have to be drawn from areas that are moving into the Belfast City Council area.

Membership of the statutory transition committees should proportionately reflect the political composition of the existing councils. At stakeholder events earlier this year, it was agreed that to specify and strictly apply the methods to be used to achieve proportionality could disadvantage smaller parties and upset the balance that was achieved in voluntary transition committees (VTCs). Therefore, I have decided that, to maintain and allow maximum flexibility, no particular method of selection will be prescribed. However, the Department will recommend in guidance, as it did with the VTCs, that STCs should use d'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë or single transferable vote (STV) mechanisms, with d'Hondt as the default position. That approach is in line with the mechanisms that are set out in the draft Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill. However, if a council wishes to embed a system of proportionality that has a higher threshold and goes further than any of the models that are outlined in the guidance, they can do so with the approval of the Department. One VTC and two councils wish to go there.

The draft regulations provide for the election of a chair and vice-chair. Guidance will state that the presumption is that those roles will rotate.

However, an STC may appoint a chair and vice-chair for the duration if they choose to do so. The chair will have a casting vote in the event of a tie, but not when it comes to the appointment of staff. Provision has been made in the regulations for an existing council to pay a member of the STC an allowance for work done on behalf of the Committee. The amount will not exceed £2,700 per annum. Councils will have to decide whether that amount is justified. In my view, it will be.

The draft regulations require predecessor councils to provide a statutory transition committee with premises and facilities, including administrative staff, and to meet reasonable costs incurred by the STC. Costs will be split between predecessor councils in proportion to the number of members that each nominates to the STC. The draft regulations will require the STC to gather information and consider and advise on matters relevant to ensuring that the new council will be able to adapt its full range of powers and functions from 1 April 2015.

The Department has already provided the sector with a list of specific tasks that STCs will need to undertake. That will be supported by guidance, but the crucial tasks, which are already set out in the regulations, include preparing a draft corporate and business plan and a draft budget for agreement of the new council; publishing its corporate and business plan; agreeing with the predecessor councils a budget for the operation of the committee; and arranging the first meeting of the new council.

I come now to the issue that has so far attracted most attention. In the statutory phase, transition committees will be required to arrange the appointment of chief executives to lead the change management process and drive convergence. Though the STCs are short-term bodies, the newly appointed chief executives will transfer to lead the new councils once they are constituted. My preference — I stress again that it is a view widely shared in the Chamber and across the councils and voluntary transition committees — is for those chief executives to be appointed by open and full competition. The draft regulations place a duty on the STC to appoint a chief executive to the new council on the basis of fair and open competition. I believe in that point very strongly. I believe that there is very wide public and political endorsement for it. I hope that, while respecting the interests of all staff, including the chief executives and all the representative bodies, this opportunity to shape councils with new chief executives, whether

they come from councils or from outside the councils, will be grasped by all.

It must be remembered that the 11 chief executive posts are not broadly comparable with the existing 26 chief executive posts. The new councils will cover geographically larger areas, serve a bigger population and deliver significant new functions. That latter point is very important. The new chief executives will preside over councils with new powers and duties that include spatial planning, regeneration, community planning and the general power of competence. Councils will also operate within a new governance framework. Therefore, the job specification of a new chief executive will clearly reflect that growth and the changes and challenges inherent in the job of creating and building a new organisation, successfully managing the transition from old to new, and managing the transformation on into creating stability and excellence in a new council.

It is my intention that the process for the appointment of chief executives to STCs should follow the current process and the Staff Commission's code of procedures as far as is practical. I want to stress that point. The Staff Commission will still have its statutory oversight and a joint Department of the Environment/Staff Commission working group is, by following existing procedures and the statutory code as far as is practical, developing the right model to get the right outcome on the right side of the law and the right side of everybody's interests as far as is practical.

At present, most councils delegate the power of appointment of chief executives to an interview panel comprising the council chair, representatives from the Staff Commission, independent observers and between four and seven members of the council. Only elected members have voting rights on the panel, and they make the decision on behalf of the full council. However, in several councils, the decision of elected members is then put to full council for ratification. That is common practice in other jurisdictions. My officials are working with the Staff Commission to design a bespoke process based on the existing model. As a body corporate, an STC may appoint other staff to the new council for its district as it deems appropriate. I am sure that there will be a question on that shortly.

The draft regulations will also require councils to provide information to STCs and will require STCs —

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have to interrupt the Minister because it is time for questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn and will require a written answer.

G8 Summit

1. **Mr Byrne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact of the G8 summit 2013. (AQO 4413/11-15)

4. **Mr Campbell** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the potential for inward investment from the members of the G8, following the recent summit. (AQO 4416/11-15)

13. **Mr F McCann** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what their expectations are from the proposed G8 investment conference. (AQO 4425/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to answer questions 1, 4 and 13 together. Again with your permission, I might need some extra time to answer all three questions.

The G8 summit was a tremendous success for us because it generated very significant positive international coverage. We had eight of the world's leaders here, plus the presidents of the institutions of the European Union and leaders from other influential countries and organisations. The First Minister and I were able to engage with them directly to welcome them here and to discuss a number of our priorities, as well as how we might engage with those countries to progress those priorities. We spent time at Lough Erne speaking directly to the G8 leaders about a number of economic, trade and investment issues. We also discussed how we could maximise our science and technology expertise internationally and how we could contribute to stabilisation in areas through sharing our conflict resolution experience. We have been following up on those issues, and we are already seeing the benefits, with the G8 countries and others agreeing to participate in an economic conference later this year.

The G8 has enabled us to raise our profile internationally in a positive way. The world's

media were able to see and report at first hand the infrastructure that we have that supports investment and the products and services that our companies can offer to other countries. Everyone who saw the TV and newspaper coverage of the events at Enniskillen will know that the surroundings, the countryside and even the weather were at their best. That will greatly help our international tourism message around the world.

We have all worked hard to ensure that a very positive image has been created internationally. We have made contacts and have discussed practical initiatives for the future that will provide long-term benefits. We now need to capitalise on that and to build a legacy that will increase our exports, bring in investment, enhance our technical skills and bring more people to visit us here. We have made many friends internationally, and we need to maintain and develop those friendships.

I commend those campaigners who took part in the various protests throughout the North. We saw the first peaceful G8 happen here, and that sends a very positive message. I pay tribute to all those who were involved in the preparation and successful planning of the G8 event. Although some costs were associated with hosting this world event, the benefits will be greater in the medium and longer term.

We need to continue to tell our story internationally of how we have managed the transition from conflict to peace. The G8 gave us an opportunity to tell those leaders that we intend to continue to take our community forward in a peaceful and united way.

Mr Byrne: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. What legacy in the form of economic and tourism benefits does he expect will result in Northern Ireland in the future?

Mr M McGuinness: First, it has to be said — given the history of where we have lived over many decades — that this was a real opportunity to tell the international community how the situation here has been transformed. Of course, one of the features of our Programmes for Government over the time of the previous Assembly and this one is that we have been proclaiming to the world that we are open for business. I think that that is hugely important. The world has seen at first hand how open we are for business through the success of the G8 summit. The fact that it was peaceful sends a hugely important message to the world about how the situation here has been transformed.

The legacy is that there are all sorts of opportunities, not least in the tourism industry. We could not pay for the airtime that we received and the international coverage that we saw, given the cost of promoting tourism here in other countries. Sending the message that we are open for business gives those who are considering foreign direct investment in this part of the world an opportunity to come here and look at what we have to offer. At the end of the G8, the Japanese Prime Minister came to Belfast and announced the creation of over 400 jobs in Larne at a medical device company. That shows that there are opportunities out there that we have to seize with both hands.

Mr Campbell: I raised this subject last week with the Prime Minister, but can the deputy First Minister indicate the nature of the discussions that will take place with the Prime Minister and the American Administration in the run-up to the investment conference in an effort to make sure that we maximise the opportunities that flow from the success of the G8?

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I have had discussions with David Cameron about that. When we met President Obama in Belfast, before his speech at the Waterfront Hall, we took the opportunity to apprise him of the fact that there will be an economic investment conference later this year, and we got a very good reception. There is a clear understanding that we will be supported in a very dynamic way by both Administrations. Given that we were both involved, with others, in an economic investment conference that was sponsored by President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton at the State Department, it is obvious that the US Administration are still very engaged in attracting investment to this part of the world.

I hope that their joint input and the invitations that have been issued to the other Administrations that arrived here with them will lead to a very dynamic investment conference later this year. I have no doubt whatsoever that a huge effort will be made on our part and that that will be supported by those Administrations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Fra McCann is not in his place.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the deputy First Minister for his answers. One of the big issues for discussion at the G8 was trade, although there were a number of other issues that people wanted to see on the table. Will the deputy First Minister outline whether the trade

discussions that took place will have a positive impact for local businesses?

Mr M McGuinness: We welcome the launch of talks at the G8 summit to agree a new trade pact between the United States of America and the European Union. After the South of Ireland, the United States is our second largest export market, with £533 million in export sales up to the year ending March 2013. Therefore, any action taken to lower tariffs between the US and the EU can only help us to expand our export market further into the United States.

We recognise that, as it becomes freer and much more open, the global economy must benefit developed and developing nations alike. Trade must not be one nation's success at the expense of another's failure. That can happen only with fair and consistent rules being properly enforced.

To increase our export sales to developing nations, reduced border bureaucracy, improved infrastructure and less protectionism will be necessary. That requires buy-in from the Governments, businesses and civil society on the importance of free trade.

Mr McCarthy: Does the deputy First Minister agree that it was more than coincidental that, after returning home from Northern Ireland, the leaders of the world decided that it would be better to talk to the Taliban, thus saving lives in Afghanistan?

Mr M McGuinness: Far be it from me to involve myself in US foreign policy, but given that we have been receiving reports over the past three years that indirect conversations have been taking place between the US Administration and the Taliban, I find it encouraging that direct talks appear to be on the horizon in the not-too-distant future. Anything that is being done to resolve conflict anywhere in the world will always be welcomed by us. Indeed, we are much in demand because many representatives from all parties in the Assembly have travelled to many of the world's trouble spots at the invitation of others. From my perspective, the engagement is a positive development. The hope has to be that it leads to an end to conflict, violence and death.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Magdalene Laundries

3. **Ms McGahan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they expect to receive a report from the senior official who is examining Magdalene laundry-type institutions. (AQO 4415/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): As the Member will be aware, the publication of McAleese report into the Magdalene laundries raised questions about the system of Magdalene laundries here and about the situations and experiences of the women who lived in them. In light of that report and representations made to us, we appointed a senior civil servant to draw up a scoping paper on Magdalene laundry-type institutions that operated here so as to inform us of potential actions we might be able to take. We received that report at the end of last week, and we intend to give serious consideration to the options that have been laid out. It is too early at this stage to state whether the options are exhaustive, but we will consider the advice and options in the paper very carefully before deciding the way forward.

Under the terms of reference of the historical institutional abuse inquiry, any woman who entered a laundry before she was 18 may contribute to the inquiry, including recounting their childhood experiences to the inquiry's acknowledgement forum. However, we recognise that there are women who were over the age of 18 when they entered Magdalene laundry-type institutions, and there is a need to provide them with a forum where their issues can be addressed and their experiences acknowledged.

We are appalled to think that women in laundries here could have endured the same harsh conditions and callous treatment as that documented by Senator McAleese. Our thoughts and sympathies are with any women who suffered in such institutions.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. In light of the compensation scheme announced by the Government in the South, what plans do the Executive have to make a similar scheme here?

Ms J McCann: In light of the answer that I have just given, it would be a bit premature to outline plans before we look at the suggestions in the

scoping report. We have just received that report, and we are very mindful, as I said, of the callous treatment of the people who were in those types of institutions. Indeed, junior Minister Bell and I met some of those victims and survivors, and the stories that they told were horrendous. We do not want to rush to judgement. Once we read the report, we will give very careful thought to the recommendations that the scoping exercise has brought forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has already been answered.

Age Discrimination: Goods, Facilities and Services

5. **Ms S Ramsey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what advice they have received from the Equality Commission about age discrimination legislation on the provision of goods, facilities and services. (AQO 4417/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Jennifer McCann to answer the question.

Ms J McCann: The Equality Commission has sent us a report entitled 'Protecting children and young people against unlawful age discrimination in the provision of goods and services'. The report was jointly prepared by the Equality Commission and the Commissioner for Children and Young People. We appreciate that the report has been brought to our attention. It is a detailed piece of work and a thoughtful contribution to the debate. We look forward to studying it more closely and discussing it with the Equality Commission and the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the junior Minister for her answer. I appreciate that the Equality Commission and the Children's Commissioner have sent the report, and that you have said that it is detailed. Can you give us any indication of anything in the report that states that there should be exceptions within the scope of the proposed legislation?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that we made a commitment in the Programme for Government to extend age discrimination legislation in relation to goods, facilities and services. I think that the report states that it is not always appropriate for children and young

people to be treated in the same way as adults. However, there is no basis for not providing legislative and enforceable rights.

Some examples of where we would say that children should be treated differently are, for instance, common sense issues around the sale of alcohol and marriage. The report very clearly says that only when a social policy objective is being pursued should that be the case. It recommends that the legislation permits age-based concessions, such as discounts and offers. I know that during the Assembly debate, we had some discussion around that, but a common sense approach needs to be borne in mind. There are some situations in which we have to have differences because of a person's age.

2.45 pm

Mr Eastwood: I recognise the fact that this was discussed in Committee with the Ministers last week. I recognise the candour shown by the Ministers around the lack of agreement by the Department on the final scope of the legislation. It was useful to have that candour. Can the Minister tell us when we can expect agreement in the Department around whether the legislation will extend to young people?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware, as we brought up at the Committee last week, that we are looking at that. We are still considering the scope of the legislation before putting it out for consultation. Many different sectors have given us information on how they would like to see the legislation being brought forward. However, as I said, we are still looking at it. It has moved on and is progressing, and we are hopeful that it will be passed by March 2015, as we said at the Committee last week.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the junior Minister for her answers so far. However, she will be aware that the age discrimination legislation is one of many jammed in OFMDFM. Given that we are just about to go into recess, can she give commitments on the publication of the sexual orientation strategy or the racial equality strategy? I know that she has already touched on that, but will she set a date by which time they should be finished?

Ms J McCann: All I can say to the Member is that I cannot give a definitive date today. We are progressing on all those issues. The Member will be aware that there are different views in the sectors and even in this House around all the issues he mentioned. However, we are progressing well on them. We hope that

we will have a definitive date. We are very hopeful that the age discrimination legislation is on track for 31 March 2015, but I have no definitive date for the other strategies that the Member mentioned. We are making progress on them.

Mr Lyttle: Has any work been done to assess how Australia has extended age discrimination legislation on the provision of goods, facilities and services to all ages?

Ms J McCann: As part of the process, we have met, for instance, the Ministers with responsibility for children and young people from the Welsh and Scottish Parliaments and the South of Ireland. We are in constant contact with the Children's Commissioner on this. We are looking at best practice, as should be the case. There are specific areas involving young people, particularly around access to mental health services. We have looked at that in great detail. So there is best practice. We are discussing that with people in different jurisdictions to see how it has rolled out in their areas, and we will continue to do that.

FM/DFM: Visit to China

6. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline any plans the Executive have to follow up on the recent visit to China. (AQO 4418/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: Our recent mission to China was to strengthen Government-to-Government relationships. We were supported throughout the visit by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, which is responsible for inviting foreign Governments to China. During our meeting with its president, we received an invitation for the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to lead a delegation to a Sino-European conference in China later this year.

There is enormous potential for our agrifood sector in China, and this will be an important step towards opening up the market to our products.

The key meeting for us was with Vice-Premier Liu Yandong, who initially invited us to China during her visit here last year. Madam Liu confirmed that China would like to see a strong relationship developing with us and said that we should be more active in promoting trade, tourism, education and technology. Vice-Premier Liu also asked us to consider establishing a presence in China and more

formal partnerships with a number of regions there. Establishing a more permanent presence and partnership with regions was also discussed when we met Foreign Affairs Vice-Minister Song Tao. We agreed that we would establish an office in Beijing, and he confirmed that that would be seen as a very positive step in the relationship with China.

We also met Minister Yuan Guiren from the Ministry of Education to encourage more Chinese students to come and study here and to establish more university partnerships to exchange knowledge.

A key focus of our future work with China will be to promote economic opportunities. We met Director General Sun Yongfu at the Ministry of Commerce and discussed a number of issues, including the removal of barriers and bureaucracy in trade, which will lead to economic benefits and jobs. We also invited the Minister to consider bringing potential investors to Belfast later this year. Some of our local businesspeople who operate in China met us and provided —

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

Mr M McGuinness: — a lot of useful advice.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the deputy First Minister confirm that any office in Beijing will be similar to those in Brussels and Washington in delivering increased trade connections?

Mr M McGuinness: As I said, it is our desire to open an office in Beijing. We are pursuing that objective very proactively. China is an important and growing export market for our companies, many of which visit China each year with trade delegations organised by Invest NI. In 2010-11, we exported almost £112 million worth of goods to China. That increased to £116 million in 2011-12. Invest NI has had an office in China for many years and is now firmly established in Shanghai. Shanghai was chosen because it has become China's business capital. Invest NI has contracted three full-time advisers, who are based in Shanghai and Taiwan. Their role is to provide bespoke research and advice for our companies and to identify market opportunities.

The commitment to China is evidenced by Invest NI's strategy, which includes two annual trade missions to key business centres such as Shanghai and Hong Kong and other developing cities across China. Over the last six years, 350-plus local companies have participated in

the trade visits. As a result of that strategy, that market is worth in excess of £110 million in exports by local companies and is sustaining valuable employment there. Invest NI recently recruited a territory manager for the Asia-Pacific region to place greater emphasis on trade and foreign direct investment. That work continues, and there is no doubt that a determined effort is being made to further develop our relationships in China.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister will be aware of the Confucius Institute and its particular role in helping to build relationships and that the relationship-building process is a real precursor to doing business. What role, if any, do you see for the Confucius Institute in establishing links and helping to build relationships?

Mr M McGuinness: The Member is absolutely correct that the relationship with the Hanban/Confucius Institute is vital. When Madam Liu Yandong came to Belfast, she was anxious to visit the Jordanstown campus of the new University of Ulster and see the work that is being done there as a result of the Confucius connections. A critical factor in attracting foreign direct investment is building personal relationships not just between the First Minister and me and the politicians we meet, although that is vital, but at an educational level between Queen's University, the new University of Ulster and the institutes in China. That is true for any region of the world, and we have learnt it through our experience in the United States of America. We know that they are hugely interested in the very large number of Chinese students who are being educated here. However, they are also keenly interested to establish whether an effort has been made in our primary schools to teach our children Chinese. Happily, that is now beginning to happen.

Economic Pact: Capital Investment

7. **Mr Cree** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the agreement on the investment plan to deliver £18 billion of capital funding, announced as part of the economic pact with the Prime Minister. (AQO 4419/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The economic package 'Building a Prosperous and United Community' was announced on 14 June 2013 and ratified by the Executive on 27 June. The package referenced the government commitment to provide an £18 billion investment package over the period 2005 to 2017. As part of the measures agreed in the economic package, we were able to ensure that the investment

agreement was back on course to meet the £18 billion commitment. In May 2007, the then Chancellor, Gordon Brown, made a commitment on behalf of the British Government to an £18 billion long-term investment strategy from 2005 to 2017, and the Executive have been determined to hold the Government to that commitment. The outcome of the 2010 spending review, with the significant capital DEL reductions imposed here, cast much doubt on whether the £18 billion would be achievable. However, the Government have recently prioritised capital investment, and we have benefited and will continue to benefit through the Barnett formula. The additional capital DEL that we have received in recent years, along with the expectation of further increases beyond 2014-15, has meant that we now believe it much more likely that the £18 billion of investment will be achieved by 2017. Our own investment strategy 2011-2021 sets out how we plan to invest some £13.4 billion between 2011 and 2021, of which £8.2 billion is to be invested between 2015-16 and 2020-21. That level of investment was based on the original commitment to provide £18 billion capital investment between 2005 and 2016-17. The announcement will, therefore, enable us to continue to invest in capital projects —

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

Mr M McGuinness: — as expected in the investment strategy.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister is aware that a statement should have been made to the House on all the issues involved in the economic pact. Is any strategy in place or being developed on how that capital investment should be focused?

Mr M McGuinness: First, the First Minister will make a statement to the Assembly tomorrow on the economic pact.

Our investment strategy is hugely important as we go forward. People here have a clear understanding that this was a huge issue of discord between us and the London Government. In fact, the First Minister and I had, on countless occasions, raised this issue directly with the powers that be in Downing Street, with the British Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister. We have now got it back on track, and it is a good news story, particularly for our construction industry, which has taken a big hit as a result of the world economic downturn in the past number of years. The investment strategy is hugely

important for us, and, as we all know, the public expenditure environment has changed dramatically since the 2010 spending review. In recent years, the Government have prioritised capital expenditure, and the Executive have benefited through the Barnett formula. Following the 2013 Budget, the Executive now have some £367 million of additional capital DEL this year and next year. In addition, the Government have committed to maintaining a higher level of capital investment beyond 2014-15, and, once those higher expected capital budget settlements are taken into account, we are now much more likely to meet the £18 billion deadline by 2017. Indeed, the latest DFP projection suggests capital expenditure at some £17.6 billion by 2017. That will give us considerable flexibility. Major projects have to be taken forward.

3.00 pm

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

Mr M McGuinness: We are determined that we shall meet the demands that we have set for ourselves.

Finance and Personnel

Fiscal Policy

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline his fiscal policy priorities for addressing current economic challenges. (AQO 4428/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): We have set a number of fiscal priorities. First, we must ensure that we get for Northern Ireland the absolute maximum amount of money in the block grant and that all the consequentials that are due to us come our way. Secondly, where appropriate, we will not only seek additional taxation powers but seek to ensure that Northern Ireland is a low-tax area in the United Kingdom. Thirdly, as we saw with the recent announcement, where additional borrowing powers can be obtained, we will obtain them. Lastly, we must make best use of the resources that we have. That includes making sure that we do not waste money and do not incur penalties — the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has warned us about this — by dragging our heels on some reforms, which will cost the public purse in Northern Ireland substantial amounts of money.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Are there any moves in his Department towards a more co-ordinated and planned approach to fiscal decision-making and planning?

Mr Wilson: That is the whole point of the budgetary exercises that we go through and, indeed, the exercise that we went through this morning. We look at the available resources and seek to ensure that they are allocated in the best possible way. We seek to obtain all the additional revenue that we can through the management of our assets and the sale of assets that are surplus to requirements. When it comes to year-on-year budgets, we look at departmental spend regularly to make sure that, if we are not spending money on certain things, we reallocate that money and ensure that there are no underspends. Thankfully, Departments have managed their budgets very well this year, and, as I said in my earlier statement, we manage it to the point that, if we were somebody on an average wage, our weekly underspend would be 97p. I reckon that that is fairly good management of our available money.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. I notice that, last week, the Minister launched a report by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) entitled 'Fiscal Powers: A Review of the Fiscal Powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly'. The report concludes that stamp duty, air passenger duty, landfill tax and other taxes could be devolved to Northern Ireland. Will the Minister consider the report's proposals and act on some of them?

Mr Wilson: The Executive's position is clear: we will work with the Government as part of the economic pact that was agreed with the First Minister and deputy First Minister to look at other fiscal powers that might be brought to Northern Ireland. We will decide on the basis of whether we believe that those levers will help us to run the economy in Northern Ireland better. As I pointed out in response to the report, we have to be cognisant of three things: the immediate cost; the ongoing cost; and the destabilising effect that additional fiscal powers devolved to the Assembly could have on the money that is available to us. Tax revenue regularly goes up and down. We are sheltered from that because of our reliance on the block grant at present. The more fiscal powers that are devolved to us, the more open we are to those fluctuations and the more difficult it is to

plan budgets and to plan spend for the period ahead.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his responses so far, which have been interesting. Does he agree that access to cash remains a major challenge for Northern Ireland businesses? Is he satisfied that the Government's ongoing efforts to get liquidity back into the market are working?

Mr Wilson: First, the major source of liquidity for businesses must be the banks. That is why Arlene Foster and I have regular meetings with them to be updated on what is happening to bank lending and to raise issues brought to our attention by various strands and sectors of industry across Northern Ireland. Secondly, we have sought to make finance accessible to businesses. Extra money has been put into loan funds run by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) in the spending round that I announced earlier today. Those are important sources of finance for businesses. For one sector of industry — agrifood — I announced today that we will put £10 million into a start-up fund for additional finance for the investment that the sector needs to undertake to expand over the next two or three years. A promise has been made that, if the fund proves popular, we will put more money into it. So we have done our part; the banks need to do theirs. We will keep pressing them to do that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: At the outset, I should have said that question 13 has been withdrawn and a written answer is required.

Defamation Legislation

2. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of whether the law on defamation needs to be reviewed. (AQO 4429/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have no plans to initiate a review of the law on defamation at present. With the passing of the Defamation Act 2013, there have been a number of far-reaching changes in the law in England and Wales. In my view, it would be prudent to see how those changes work through before deciding how we want to progress the issue in Northern Ireland.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer and his view. He is aware that the Finance Committee discussed the case of

John McAreavey v the 'Irish Daily Mail'. We must avoid just following Westminster legislation. We must strike the right balance for here between freedom of speech and the right to a private life, and we must not allow the gap to be exploited by poor or bad journalism. I am encouraged that the Minister will review the matter and perhaps legislate for here.

Mr Wilson: The point that I make to the Member is one recognised by the Minister when the issue was discussed in the House of Lords: it is up to devolved Administrations to look at the situation in their locality and make a decision. A lot has been made about Northern Ireland being out of step with England and Wales, but not all the provisions in the Defamation Act were introduced by the Scottish Administration. They deemed certain things particularly relevant as far as they were concerned and others not as relevant. The Member is right: we ought to look at the situation in our context.

Another point that I would make is this: there is no question of suppressing freedom of speech. Before that Act went through, people were free to express themselves and newspapers were free to carry stories. The idea that, somehow or other, as a result of this Act going through Westminster and us not implementing it, freedom of speech is being suppressed in Northern Ireland is just a lot of nonsense.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I encourage Members to keep their questions brief.

Mr Weir: Does the Minister feel that the current position or the 2013 Act provides sufficient protection to those who are defamed on social media sites?

Mr Wilson: The problem with people being defamed on social media is not so much the lack of powers to go after the people saying these things; it is the enforcement. The Act in England and Wales protects those whose sites are used to make defamatory comments. With social media, there will always be the difficulty of how you enforce the legislation. I do not believe that the changes made in England make that easier anyway.

Mr A Maginness: The Minister said that he would not undertake a review just yet. That is, I think, a wise course. However, if a review were to take place, say, in a year or 18 months' time, how does he see that being undertaken?

Mr Wilson: First of all, I think that we want to see the impact that the change in the law has in

England and Wales. We also want to see the impact that it has on the different situations that are in Northern Ireland and in England and Wales. For example, one of the concerns has been that it could lead to libel tourism. Let us see whether that is the case or whether, as a result of our not being in step with England and Wales, the freedom of the press is much more severely curtailed here in Northern Ireland than it would be in England and Wales. Mr Weir asked whether it was easier for social media-type defamation to occur here in Northern Ireland. The other point was whether it has impacted on investment in Northern Ireland. I do not believe that to be the case either, but I expect that any review would look at that. So, those are the kind of things that we want to look at in undertaking any review.

Mr Swann: At one stage, the Minister considered clause 7 of the Defamation Bill as it went through Westminster, but he was unable to get Executive agreement. Does he still see merit in legislating for those provisions, as regulated in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: It is not a question of whether I see merit in legislating. If we are going to have the legislation, it requires Executive agreement. The Member knows that if legislation is to go through, it requires cross-party support in the Assembly. The Executive were unable to get approval for a legislative consent motion for that clause. That is why I believe that it is prudent to look to see what happens in the meantime. Once we have seen the impact of the differing levels of legislation in both jurisdictions, we can make up our minds on the changes that we wish to make.

Banks: First-time Buyers

3. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what discussions he has had with banks regarding making low-deposit mortgages available to first-time buyers. (AQO 4430/11-15)

Mr Wilson: In recent times, I have had no direct discussions with banks regarding low-deposit mortgages. However, when we put the extra money into the Co-ownership Housing Association, the Social Development Minister and I met with the banks and pointed out to them that, since 50% of the risk on the price of any of those houses was now being borne by the Co-ownership Housing Association, there was no justification for demanding the 20% deposit. Most of the mortgages — in fact, I think all the mortgages — that are now lent to

co-ownership purchases are without any deposit.

I have also spoken recently to the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) about its 80:20 scheme, whereby people pay 80% of the value of a house, and if the house goes down in value over the next five years, they do not have to pay the other 20% or whatever percentage the price of the house has gone down by. If the price goes up, they do, of course, have to make that payment. I am pleased to say that NAMA is thinking about introducing the scheme that is available in the Irish Republic to the sale of houses on NAMA-owned land in Northern Ireland.

Mr Campbell: I am pleased to hear that the Minister has had meetings with NAMA. I know that quite a few people in Northern Ireland would like to do likewise. Given the discussions that he has had, does he have an estimate of the level of demand for affordable homes in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: I do not have an estimate of the level of demand. However, I know that the Co-ownership Housing Association is well oversubscribed with applications. One of the reasons why we allocated another £10 million to the Co-ownership Housing Association earlier this morning was because we wanted to try to meet that level of demand. People say, "What has the Assembly done to respond to the housing crisis?". By the end of the Assembly term, as a result of money that we have put into affordable housing schemes, 2,400 families will own a house that they would not normally have been able to afford or get access to. I think that that is an indication of how seriously we take the issue.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What discussions has the Minister had with his Executive colleagues on the need to expand loan equity provision?

3.15 pm

Mr Wilson: The Social Development Minister might make an announcement on that before the end of this Assembly term, but the Executive have made money available to other schemes for affordable housing, which have been introduced in other parts of the United Kingdom and for which we got a Barnett consequential. We have discussed that, but it is up to the Social Development Minister to bring forward proposals and announce them to the Assembly.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister agree that the Government's new scheme to boost lending to homebuyers with small deposits could push down interest rates significantly?

Mr Wilson: The fact of the matter is that we have benefited from it, and I announced that earlier. Interest rates are as low as they are probably going to get. In fact, base rates are close to zero at the moment. That is a result of the ability of the UK Government to give confidence to the financial markets when it comes to the rates at which we are loaned money. As far as low interest on mortgages is concerned, we have sought, through some of the various schemes that we have introduced, to try to make housing more affordable to low-income families, whether that is done through the kind of money that we pump into co-ownership or the Get Britain Building scheme, to which we allocated some money this morning. All those schemes will bring down the cost of housing to individuals.

Net Fiscal Balance Report

4. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the international standards against which the revenue estimates produced in his Department's fiscal balance report are accredited or recognised. (AQO 4431/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I am sure that the Member would love me to say that, when it comes to the net fiscal balance report, we pluck the figure out of the air, say, "There it is" and stick it down on paper. That, unfortunately, is the naive view held by Sinn Féin when it comes to the net fiscal balance report, because it does not want to believe that if we were out of the United Kingdom, we would be billions of pounds less well off. However, the figures in the net fiscal balance report come from and follow the same methodology as that used for the Government expenditure and revenue Scotland (GERS) report. Those figures are subject to international standards. There is a code of practice that they are subject to, and, as a result, international standards for the compiling of statistics have to be adhered to. These figures are not made up; they are subject to a degree of rigour and international scrutiny. Therefore, wriggle as it will, Sinn Féin will never be able to make the case that, somehow or other, we owe money to the rest of the United Kingdom rather than we get a positive flow of money from the Treasury to Northern Ireland. Therefore, that is the value of being British and part of the United Kingdom.

Some Members: Hear, hear. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Flanagan: Resign, resign. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I will not encourage shouting across the Chamber.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that very detailed answer. No doubt, he will pre-empt my supplementary question. All of this is a distraction from the simple fact that there is no statement of revenue here in the North. The figures that we have are not comparable to those available in Scotland. Can the Minister outline how and when he plans to provide accurate figures?

Mr Wilson: How many times do I have to say it, Mr Deputy Speaker? The figures in the net fiscal balance report use the same methodology as is used for the Government expenditure and revenue figures in Scotland. Those are subject to the international code of practice for official statistics. They are not made-up figures. The only point that I will concede to the Member — and it is also true for Scotland — is that for the regions of the United Kingdom, VAT figures, etc, are not compiled on the basis of how much shops a, b, c, d, e, and so on, paid in VAT, with the total VAT bill worked out from that. There is a degree of estimation and apportionment, but the methodology used is accepted internationally as being robust to give a figure that reflects the situation in each region.

I know that Sinn Féin, in pursuit of its political objective, would love to wish away the billions of pounds that come to Northern Ireland from the Exchequer, but even the fairies would not believe that, and I do not think that its own supporters believe it. The fact that 25% of its own voters would not vote for a united Ireland is an indication that it has not even sold the story to its own voters.

Mr Beggs: Some people seem to let their politics get in the way of reality. Can the Minister advise us, when the international standards are applied, what the fiscal balance in Northern Ireland has been in recent years?

Mr Wilson: I should have the figure here, but I do not have it. The net fiscal balance in 2010-11, which is the most recent year for which we have that information, was £10.526 billion, which is an indication of how dependent we are on our association with the United Kingdom and how valuable it is from the point of view of the economy. I think that many of the constituents of the party opposite would be very unhappy, if, as a result of its bankrupt economic, political and constitutional policies, we were to lose that kind of funding.

Mr Allister: If the Minister were to find that he had sufficient spare time to go back to marking economic papers, what mark would he anticipate giving Sinn Féin for its economic submissions?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I have shown great tolerance, but I think that that question goes far beyond what the Minister is here to answer. However, I leave it up to him.

Mr Wilson: I think that I have already marked its paper on a number of occasions. Let us look at the kind of fiscal prowess of the party opposite. It is the party that tells us that if we reduce the fuel duty on petrol and diesel in Northern Ireland to the level pertaining to red diesel, which would be an 80% reduction, we would, somehow or other, sell sufficiently more diesel to actually increase revenue. As I pointed out during the debate on the issue, that would mean that people would have to buy three and a half times more petrol and diesel than at present. First, how will they afford it? Secondly, where are they going to drive to? We will spend all our time driving around Northern Ireland and no time working to earn the money to pay for the petrol in the first place. I think that that indicates the kind of a mark I would give the party. It certainly would not be a pass grade; indeed, I do not know whether CCEA sets a grade that is low enough to reflect the economic knowledge of the party opposite.

Senior Civil Service: Pay

5. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel how much the recent changes to Senior Civil Service pay arrangements will cost between 2011 and 2016. (AQO 4432/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The costs of changes in the Senior Civil Service pay arrangements from the introduction of the Senior Civil Service pay strategy, with effect from 1 April 2012, were 3.5% in 2012-13, which covered a 16-month period, and 2.8% for 2013-14, which covers 12 months.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Why did he not inform the Finance Committee of those changes, which will see millions being paid to already highly paid senior civil servants?

Mr Wilson: First, when it comes to pay remits, that is the responsibility of the Minister. All pay remits do not go to the Finance and Personnel

Committee; in fact, I sign them off on an almost weekly basis for different parts of the public sector, and they do not go to the Committee.

I would point out that the Committee endorsed the decision that when we introduced equal pay, we would undertake revision and review of pay across the public sector. That was part of the review. There was review at EO2 level as well. Therefore, there was endorsement by the Executive and the Assembly of the policy that saw the review of Senior Civil Service pay. Of course, it was done by the pay review body, which is totally independent. It made recommendations on the way to avoid, for example, age discrimination cases and certain other anomalies that had crept into the system.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister confirm that no bonuses are now paid to senior civil servants, who are on high pay grades, and that no additional payments of any description are made to those senior civil servants?

Mr Wilson: As far as the pay review was concerned, bonuses have been done away with at that level. We did a number of things. We set maxima on the pay grades. We also took away the overlaps between the various pay scales. When people are promoted, they go onto the bottom of the next scale. The leapfrogging that occurred in the past is avoided. In return for certain changes, we introduced the pay regime, which I have outlined. It has cost us 3.5% over 16 months.

Dormant Accounts: Ulster Community Investment Fund

6. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update of the consultation on 'Dormant Accounts - Proposed Appointment of the Ulster Community Investment Trust'. (AQO 4433/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As the Member will be aware, consultation was undertaken by the Department on the proposal to appoint the Ulster Community Investment Trust as the administrator of the dormant accounts fund. That consultation closed in November 2012. There were eight responses. Of those, five were silent and one was supportive. Some respondents indicated that they believed that others could supply the service, and because of that and the fact that we were aware that others were interested in supplying that service, we have agreed to put the administration of dormant accounts out to public tender.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am sure that, like me, he will welcome the £3.2 million that is coming into local communities. Can he outline the spending priorities for the fund?

Mr Wilson: There are two spending priorities. The first is young people and the second is faith-based groups. First of all, the Executive want to concentrate an awful lot of our activities on young people, who, at present, face a lot of disadvantage and pressures that, perhaps, they did not face in the past, such as youth unemployment, drug problems and a whole range of other things. Secondly, I was aware of many faith-based groups that do fantastic work in the community, yet, for ethical reasons, would never have applied to the Big Lottery Fund and, therefore, lost out on resources that could have helped them to deliver some of the services that they provide in some of the most difficult circumstances. For that reason, we have made them a second priority group.

NAMA: Assets

7. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline the nature and extent of NAMA's assets. (AQO 4434/11-15)

Mr Wilson: The eventual size of the Northern Ireland portfolio in its acquisition value, not what it was worth at the start, was €1.3 billion. That comprised 18% office accommodation; 17% retail; 10% residential; 5% development, and 3% hotel and leisure assets. The balance was made up of land and other investment assets. Most of NAMA's undeveloped land portfolio in Northern Ireland is situated in the east of the Province. NAMA has also indicated that 70% of its Northern Ireland portfolio is either completed property or is producing income for it at present.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that there is no time for a supplementary question. Time is up. That concludes Question Time.

3.30 pm

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Suspected Drug-related Deaths

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Phil Flanagan has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Before I ask the Clerk to read the question, I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary. I will then call other Members who are on their feet to ask a supplementary, taking account of the same issues that I take account of at Question Time.

Mr Flanagan asked the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety how his Department and its agencies are responding to prevent further loss of life following the reported deaths of at least eight people from the suspected consumption of an illegal drug currently in circulation.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am very concerned to hear that there have been a number of sudden deaths across Northern Ireland that might be linked to drug use. I pass on my condolences to anyone who has lost a loved one or a friend in these difficult circumstances. It is important to stress that investigations into these deaths are ongoing. At this stage, we do not know whether they are drug related or what, if any, substance was involved. However, I believe that it is vital that we take a precautionary approach.

Since we were made aware of incidents last week, my Department has been liaising closely with the Department of Justice and the PSNI. We have also been working closely with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the local community. On Friday, the Chief Medical Officer issued an alert letter to health, community and alcohol and drugs services, bringing the matter to their attention. The letter asked people to highlight the risk to vulnerable groups and encourage them to dispose of any drugs safely. The PHA also issued a press release highlighting the risks associated with drug misuse generally.

My Department and the PHA will continue to work with community and voluntary services to

provide help and support to those in need. I encourage anyone with information on these deaths or, more generally, anyone who is aware of any individual involved in the supply of controlled drugs, to contact their local police on 0845 600 8000. Information can also be passed to the independent charity Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. I share his condolences to those bereaved or affected by the sudden deaths.

The point that I would like to make to the Minister is that this issue is not only for the city of Belfast, although there are strong allegations about from where the drugs are being sourced. I am hearing that those drugs are freely available not only in Belfast and the north-west but in places such as Fermanagh. Will the Minister give me an assurance that all trust areas will be involved in the measures that are being taken to best prevent further loss of life?

Mr Poots: I think that the first preventative measure is to get the message out. It is a message that we have been preaching to people for a long time: drugs, other than those prescribed by a GP and received from a pharmacist, can be dangerous. The ingestion of drugs is something that people do at their own peril. There can be complacency about drugs among people who have been taking them for a while, because they think that they are not a problem. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Certainly, it may be the case in a number of these deaths, which are unexplained at this point, that people ingested drugs. Therefore, the message should go out in a very forceful and clear way to members of the public that they should avoid drugs at all costs and that drugs can take people's lives and be very dangerous.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like the Minister and the Member who spoke previously, I send my sympathy and condolences to the families and, indeed, the wider community affected by these recent tragedies.

Minister, I think that you are right: taking either illegal drugs or drugs that are not prescribed to you is dangerous. We need to get that message out there about drugs that have not even been prescribed.

Minister, the message needs to go out from today that there is a bad batch of drugs out

there, whether legal or illegal, that are killing our people. Can you give us as much information as you can and let us know some of the symptoms that people need to look out for? Have our A&E departments been made aware of the symptoms, so that, if somebody presents at an emergency department, they will be brought through the system quicker and without having to wait? What work have the Department and the PSNI done to date to ensure that this message gets into communities through the local community infrastructure?

Mr Poots: There has been a very high profile around this issue today. As to the work that is being done, toxicology reports are being carried out on the individuals who have had the unexplained deaths. I am aware that one family has said that their loved one had not been taking drugs, and I think that we need to show respect and restraint to families at this time. We have no evidence to suggest that any of these people had taken drugs. However, there have been eight unexplained deaths — five of them in one area — and there is an indication that that may be the case. It could well be that someone has had their drink spiked with drugs, and we need to be careful about that. There are very important messages to get out to members of the public about drugs, about not taking drugs full stop, and, if they are drinking alcohol, about ensuring that they are not taking alcohol from strangers or people whom they cannot completely trust. Those are important messages, as someone may have ingested drugs with no intention of actually doing so because someone else has spiked their alcoholic drink. That is very important.

Toxicology tests are also being carried out on the drugs themselves, as drugs have been found. A course of work is being done there. Our staff in our emergency departments are trained and equipped to deal with a wide range of scenarios, including people who have taken drugs, drug overdoses and so forth. It may be possible that the drugs were bought off the internet, but it is probably unlikely given the fact that a number of people died in one particular area. There is a range of areas that we need to look at, and the message needs to keep going out that, if you have not been prescribed drugs by your GP that have been obtained from a pharmacist, you should not be taking them.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I join the Minister in his words of condolence to those who have been bereaved in what are very difficult circumstances. You will understand, Minister, the concerns of east Belfast parents, relatives and friends of the five young people who have died in this area over

the past number of days. This problem seems to be concentrated in east Belfast, and I take the point you make about a lack of evidence as to the final cause and the fact that you are seeking that evidence. You recently opened what are referred to as drugs bins, I understand, in the Connswater Shopping Centre. Is there any judgement on the success of that initiative as yet? If it is successful, do you intend to run that out into other areas?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. I did open such a box and encouraged people to use it. In the first week, over 400 items were left in that box, so, clearly, there are people who want to get rid of drugs from their community. There are also boxes at the Glandore GP surgery, the pharmacy on the Serpentine Road in north Belfast, the GP surgery on North Queen Street, the Grove centre, the Today shop on Sandy Row, Boots in Connswater and in Kilcooley in Bangor. Therefore a series of these facilities has been opened, and I would like to see more of them. We are working on the roll-out of that with FASA, but there may be others who are prepared to step up to the mark.

I should say that, while there are good people in our communities who work with us to take drugs out of the community, unfortunately, there are bad people in our communities supplying people with drugs. The truth is that, on many occasions, the bad people who supply the drugs are protected by people who claim to be protecting their community. The bottom line is that the likelihood is that people in our communities have died because they have been given materials by individuals who are being protected by people who would suggest that they are protecting communities. People need to look at themselves and reflect on that. We do not need drugs in our communities. People who are engaging in supplying drugs to our communities do not belong in our communities. The best way to get rid of such people from our communities is to speak to the police, give them all the relevant information and put those people where they belong — behind bars. I hope that the courts will step up to the mark and make sure that they are behind bars for a very long time.

Mr McDevitt: Given what the Minister has just said, does he agree that those who peddle so-called recreational drugs are in fact peddling poison and need to be brought to justice? What conversations has he had with the Chief Medical Officer in recent days about ensuring that all potential lines of enquiry about the recent areas of concern are subject to police investigation?

Mr Poots: The Chief Medical Officer will issue warnings on occasions such as this. Earlier today, I met the Justice Minister. I have also spoken to the Chief Constable and to key people throughout the Department. There is a series of things happening to ensure that we take the right steps and that everybody works in a concerted way. Minister Ford and I agreed that our officials would share all relevant information, which will then be shared with us, and that we would work together to seek to inform the public. We have to inform the public in a way that does not heighten any alarm or concern that is not based on facts. We also need to ensure that the public are concerned enough to take actions to ensure that such deaths do not happen in our communities. If the unexplained deaths are a consequence of ingesting illicit drugs, it will be the communities who will deliver on this, not the Assembly. It will be when people on the ground say, "We have had enough. We do not want our children, young people or families to be poisoned with these drugs. We want to rid our community of these people" that they will take action and give the police the information.

It is not kids who are involved; the deaths have involved adults in their 20s and 30s. That should drive out a very important message: drugs are never safe. We do not need to be encouraging young people to participate in drug taking. As people get a little older and are still taking drugs, they really should take stock of what they are doing with their life. Taking drugs can be a dangerous business.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he confirm that there is no testing on illegal drugs? They do not go through the detailed National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) testing that any prescribed medicine undergoes. Furthermore, does he agree that the people profiting from this are profiting from the death and ill health of many young people and those in other age groups?

Mr Poots: I agree with the Member. The drugs could be made in a make-up lab or in someone's kitchen. We do not know where the drugs are made. They have certainly not gone through pharmaceutical testing and, consequently, do not have the safety standards that we would expect with drugs received from a pharmacist with their advice. That is obvious.

The second element is also obvious: people do not sell drugs for the good of a community. People sell drugs because they can make huge profits. They do not care for the individuals to whom they sell the drugs or whether they can

afford them, whether it has an impact on their family or what hurt, harm and damage it does. That is why I say very clearly today that communities need to hand these people over. They are poisoning our communities. We do not need drug dealers, we do not want drug dealers, and we do not want their drugs. The best means of getting rid of them is for people to stand up and say, "We have had enough" and hand over to the police all the relevant information, which can be taken to the courts. Between the police and the justice system, those people should be put where they belong — behind bars — for a long time.

3.45 pm

Mr Agnew: I extend my condolences and those of my party to the families affected by the eight deaths and to the wider community. I accept that no anti-drugs campaign will ever be 100% successful, but what consideration has the Minister given to harm-reduction facilities, for example, drug testing?

Mr Poots: We have established a drug and alcohol monitoring and information system. It is an early warning system between DHSSPS, the Department of Justice, the PSNI and local community and voluntary groups. A number of different substances have been mentioned, including "Green Rolexes", "Red Es" and "Pink McDonalds", but that is not an exhaustive list of what may be dangerous. Although people may want to avoid those drugs, that is not to say that others are safe — far from it. We are aware that these drugs could be very dangerous, but other drugs may also be very dangerous at present. At this stage, we are not sure whether one or more of these substances is involved, but the best thing that people can do is to take a precautionary approach. The PSNI is leading on the investigation, and we understand that it has asked that tests be undertaken as quickly as possible. As yet, we do not know for sure about these drugs, but we will supply that information as and when it becomes available.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for raising this question. I also thank the Minister and support his very robust comments about the people who may be behind the drug-dealing business. I add my voice to those offering condolences to the bereaved families.

As the Minister suggested, I want to be very sensitive because we do not know the precise circumstances in which a number of these young people have lost their life. However, we all know that too many people suffer as a result

of the drug trade. I wholeheartedly support the Minister in his call for a very robust challenge. The fact is that people are not just dealing poison in our community; they are dealing death. That is an ongoing problem.

As well as the information that the Minister has committed to giving us as early as possible, we need an early statement from the Chief Constable and the Minister of Justice. The public and every party in the House are well aware that people well known in the community are dealing in death through the drugs trade and are polluting our communities. If now is not an optimum time for political parties and other community leaders to mobilise against these death dealers, I do not know when would be.

We owe it to the bereaved and those who have suffered in the past from the drugs trade to ensure that we make a clear statement today. We want to give people information that could save their life and save them from falling into harm, but we also need to make sure that we send out a message that no quarter will be given to drug dealers. All steps must be taken to have them locked up behind bars as soon as possible. I would like to hear a statement from the Minister of Justice in the House as soon as possible.

Mr Poots: I am not exactly sure what the question was. Nonetheless, there was a lot there that I can agree with.

Normally, toxicology reports on bodies take 30 to 60 days. I know that the PSNI has asked for that information to come back as quickly as possible. Hopefully, we will get that sooner rather than later and it will help with the inquiries.

The very important message is that communities need to turn on these individuals. I will also drive home today the very important message to our judges and our courts that, when the communities stand up to these people, which is not easy to do — they are often nasty and violent individuals — they will stand shoulder to shoulder with them and give those people appropriate prison sentences and not a slap on the wrist. The community and often people in the House are fed up with judges treating criminals with kid gloves.

Executive Committee Business

Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Debate resumed on motion:

That the draft Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved. — [Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment).]

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will continue my statement.

The draft regulations will also require councils to provide information to statutory transition committees. They will require STCs to provide information to the new council for its district, to share information with other committees and to provide any necessary information to predecessor councils. Each STC must have due regard to any guidance that the Department issues.

Provision has also been made in the regulations for STCs to wind up and therefore cease to exist 28 calendar days after the local government elections in 2014. The draft regulations to establish STCs mean that a key milestone has been reached as the 11 committees join in the robust implementation structures already in place. To drive the programme, I have already established the regional transition committee (RTC), which I chair, to act as the main driver for reform and to provide high-level political leadership. When necessary, I convene the political reference subgroup, which is made up of members of each party, as well as representatives from within and from outside the Assembly. There have been three meetings of that group. There are members here who can speak for themselves, but I have to say that, although we have touched on some difficult and sensitive matters, I have been impressed by the insight and, indeed, the wisdom that I have observed in that group.

I have also established the regional transition operational board (RTOB), which comprises government officials and council officers, to support the RTC and to co-ordinate the operational delivery of the reform programme. There is a vast mountain and streams of work on that to ensure that we get it done and get it

done right. Finally, I have established a number of task-and-finish working groups to focus on key areas of transferring functions; finance; HR; legislation; pilots and community planning; programme delivery; and communications and systems convergence.

The progress of the STC regulations will be timely and will sit alongside the fact that the Executive, as Members know, agreed the package of functions that will transfer to local government on 1 April 2015. That enables Departments to provide certainty to staff and to draw up transfer arrangements. Secondly, the local government Bill has been drafted and circulated to ministerial colleagues for some time. I had hoped to introduce it before the summer recess, but I still await Executive approval. I have applied to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for urgent procedure for that, so it might yet be on the Order Paper for tomorrow. If not, the Bill will be introduced as early as possible in the next session. A significant programme of subordinate legislation is also required to complete the legislative framework and to give effect to the Bill, when enacted.

As of 1 May, a remuneration panel has been established to conduct a review of councillors' remuneration and to advise on a system and level of allowances that are appropriate for the new councils. The panel has been asked to reflect the roles and responsibilities that councillors will take on in the new councils, and it has six months to submit its final recommendations. I have made it clear to the panel that it has to submit those recommendations within six months to inform the minds of members — sitting members and potential new members of councils — on issues that they may have to decide on, not least severance.

As Members also know, the consultation on the proposed arrangements for a councillors' severance scheme has been completed. If I recall rightly, I understand that the summary of the responses to the consultation was shared with the Committee last week. It is expected that the regulations will be laid in the Assembly shortly, with councillors being able to apply for the scheme in August this year. The scheme will be on a one-off basis and for councillors who decide not to stand for election in the future. The scheme will be very much in the image of what we consulted on. Although it is not within the scope of the scheme and I do not think that it is right that it should be, I also acknowledge the many councillors who are not now in councils who served this part of the world very well for many years and have left the

political stage before now. I do not think that I have done that properly and fully before. Arguably, they should have some recognition as well. I made a political judgement that that was not where we should go, but I want to acknowledge the members, including those from my party and other parties, who have contacted me about the overall scheme.

At the Executive meeting on 20 February, ministerial colleagues accepted the view that some financial support was required to deliver reform and agreed a package of £47.8 million. Officials in my Department and in DFP have been working to develop administrative and legislative arrangements for the distribution and management of the funding. As Members know, the Finance Minister confirmed to the House in his statement on the June monitoring round that the allocation of the first tranche of moneys from the Executive package was agreed at last Thursday's Executive meeting as part of the overall monitoring outcome.

Liaison is also ongoing between my Department and the NIO on the provision of shadow arrangements for the new councils, which is the transitional period that will run from the date of the next local government elections in 2014 until 1 April 2015, when the new councils will adopt their full role, responsibilities, powers and functions. The process will require legislation to be made at Westminster and in the Assembly, as the elections are an excepted matter that is the responsibility of the Secretary of State, while local government is a transferred matter.

In that regard, after the summer, one set of regulations will be tabled here to enable Westminster to take forward three sets of subordinate legislation for which it is responsible; namely the appointment of returning officers, the shape of the DEAs and a third set, which has suddenly gone out of my head. I will come back to it.

As I stated earlier, the regulations are a key step forward in the reorganisation of local government and a step closer to the establishment of 11 new, strong councils to address the needs of all our citizens. I ask the Assembly to approve the draft regulations.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): As Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment, I support the motion to affirm the Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.

The regulations will begin the process of reorganising local government and will implement the establishment of statutory, rather than voluntary, transition committees. The regulations also set out the powers and functions of the committees, in particular the power to appoint a new chief executive or clerk, as the position has been traditionally titled.

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

The Department initially provided the Committee with an outline of the anticipated provisions of the legislation in October 2012 and returned more recently to brief its members when the statutory rule was laid in the Assembly. The Committee asked the Department for some clarification of the guidance to be provided on the nomination of representatives by councils to the new statutory transition committees. Committee members were very aware that there were differences in how that was carried out at local level in the appointment of the previous voluntary transition committees.

The Committee welcomed the Department's intention to refresh the original guidance to specify three methodologies that should be used for those appointments, with the d'Hondt procedure to be employed where councils fail to agree on the selection of a methodology.

The Committee also expressed concerns over the procedures to be applied by the Department in the appointment of clerks to the eleven new councils. The Minister has written to me outlining the new process based on open competition that he proposes to use for these appointments. Although the Committee fully supports openness and transparency in such high-level appointments and the use of an assessment centre to ensure the high calibre of candidates, the final stage of the process does not appear to have been fully determined. The legislation indicates, at clause 18, that the appointment of a person to the office of clerk must be approved by a two thirds majority of the membership of the statutory transition committee. At this point, the Department has been unable to confirm whether the transition committee will consider more than one candidate and whether, if that candidate is rejected, a second candidate will be considered or the competition rerun.

4.00 pm

The Committee also expressed concerns about the legal implications of what is effectively a power of veto if the first candidate is rejected by

the transition committee. Would the transition committee be liable to possible industrial tribunal proceedings? After considerable discussion, the Committee was prepared to accept the Department's assurances that it would bring back the details of the appointment procedures as soon as they were developed.

The Committee also supported the Department's intention to work closely with the Local Government Staff Commission in devising procedures. The Committee encourages the Department to address the commission's serious concerns.

I would like to add a few words as MLA for South Belfast. As the Minister has just mentioned, we will not see the Local Government (Reorganisation) Bill this side of recess. My party and I are very concerned at the lack of progress on the Bill. With the elections to the shadow councils scheduled for May, we are running extremely tight on time. We need the Bill to be introduced soon after the summer recess to allow for proper scrutiny to ensure it is passed ahead of time and that we are not rushing at the final minute. Perhaps the Minister will outline to the House what is holding the Bill up. As he said, we have only about 700 days to go, and, as he said during his most recent Question Time, the Bill has been with the Executive since April. Will the Minister elaborate on the points that the Executive need to discuss further or require clarification on.

We note that the statutory transition committees will have responsibility for appointing chief executives to the new councils. There was much discussion on that in Committee, and more light needs to be shed on the appointment process. There is still a bit of confusion and ambiguity, and the Minister might like to elaborate on that. However, more importantly, it is necessary that we have assurances from the Minister that the chief executives will not be appointed in a vacuum and that there will be a role for them in what will be very well paid posts.

Also, it is incredibly important that the Minister keeps a close eye on the proportionality of the statutory transition committees. I welcome the assurances we have that d'Hondt will be the fallback position. However, the Minister must ensure that, in councils where agreement is reached without d'Hondt being applied, it is done along the lines of proportionality. I am keen to hear from the Minister about what steps, if any, can be taken if councils ignore proportionality in their appointments.

Mr Weir: During the Chairperson's remarks, the clock in the Chamber went round 10 hours. I appreciate that the Member was not speaking for that length of time. Sometimes, when the Minister is on his feet, it feels like he has been speaking for 10 hours, but thankfully the Minister was the very soul of brevity, if not wit, today.

I start by declaring an interest as a member of North Down Borough Council. I am also a member of the North Down and Ards voluntary transition committee and the political reference group. I am not sure whether Members will see that as a declaration of interest or almost a confession at Nuremberg, such is the approach that some take to those of us who are still involved in local government.

Before I address the issue of statutory transition committees, I welcome the broader update that the Minister has provided on the RPA process. I particularly want to associate myself with his remarks about those who served on councils but are no longer with us, in many cases because they have retired and, in other cases, sadly, because they are no longer with us in any shape or form on this earth. Those men and women played a very significant role over the years in protecting democracy in Northern Ireland, often in very difficult circumstances.

I welcome the regulations that are before us. As the Minister indicated, there is broad agreement on them. The regulations were welcomed by the political reference group and were unanimously supported by the Committee for the Environment, and that is not the case on every matter. The legislation has been sought by those in local government for some time.

I welcome the regulations for two reasons in particular. The Minister referred to some of the other steps. First, they reaffirm and send out a clear-cut signal to all in the local government sector that RPA is moving ahead and being put in place. Perhaps because of the length of time that the RPA process has taken — it was first mooted more than a decade ago — there is, at times, some scepticism in the sector about time frames and implementation. To be fair to the Minister, on pretty much every occasion that I have heard him address any group of councillors and council officials, he has been very clear that RPA is going ahead and will be implemented. Often, it seems that, despite whatever assurances the Minister gives, very soon we are back at square one, with people asking whether it is really going to happen. I hope that today's decision on the statutory transition committees sends a very clear signal that we are moving ahead.

The regulations are also important because they give the necessary powers to the statutory transition committees. Due to the lack of those direct powers, there has been a sense among many members of the voluntary transition committees of marking time. That is understandable. However, at times, that has been used as an excuse by some. Perhaps there should have been a faster pushing ahead on the part of voluntary transition committees, but if anyone had any excuses, those have been largely removed.

There has been mention of the issuing of departmental guidance on a range of issues, and that is welcome and helpful. Essentially, the purpose of the statutory transition committees is to build a platform for the new councils: to take the steps that are required. A lot of that will not be party political in nature; it will be putting in place a lot of the necessary administration. There is a large volume of work to be done, and it is good that the green light has been given.

The power that most will focus on is the appointment of the chief executives. That is a key preparation step that needs to be taken. Those new chief executives can, in many ways, act as change managers in the statutory transition committees as we head toward the establishment of shadow councils. It is important that they be put in place. I appreciate that there was some discussion at Committee and elsewhere on whether their appointment was premature and whether there was a level of democratic deficit because they will be servicing new councils and it will be the statutory transition committees that will appoint them. My view is that there is relatively little difference between that and the situation for people when they enter local government, or even the Assembly. In many ways, they are bound by various decisions that have been made before they arrive. I think that quite a sensible approach is being taken.

The Minister referred to his very strong preference for open competition for those posts. I strongly concur with him. This is going to be an enormous challenge for councillors and staff who will be dealing with much larger organisations. We will need leadership in councils at chief executive level that is 100% fit for purpose. As such, in many ways, it seems a no-brainer to say that we should have open competition to have the best possible men and women running those organisations. I suspect that, in a lot of cases, many of those who are currently chief executives may well end up being appointed chief executives of the new councils. However, we lose absolutely nothing,

and indeed have everything to gain, by having that open competition. There seems to be an argument that the 11 new chief executive posts should essentially be ring-fenced for the people there at present. That seems to me as absurd a notion as saying that, when we have the elections next year for the new councils, those eligible to be councillors in 2014 should be ring-fenced as the councillors who are there at present; that may be something that would be welcomed by some councillors. Clearly, that is an absurd notion, which no one would accept as correct. A process that enables the best possible people to come forward to be judged and selected on merit is, I think, one that is very much to be welcomed.

Departmental officials gave us a considerable briefing on the process, which gave us a reasonable level of assurance. However, there is one outstanding issue. Indications were given that, in tweaking the details of this over the summer and as we move into the autumn, departmental officials will take advice, particularly from the staff commission and other organisations, to ensure that the process is got right. I can understand the notion of a ratification of a new chief executive. In many ways, that is what happens for staff appointments at present, even if it is a formality.

I still have a degree of reservation. I appreciate that this is an attempt to try to ensure that there is a maximum level of buy-in. The two-thirds majority is something that I think needs to be looked at. From a practical point of view, where you have a process that has councillors at the centre of it with selection that is done on merit, it would be a very brave or perhaps a very foolish transition committee that would say, "You can either accept or reject that recommendation on the basis of a two-thirds majority. We have had a perfectly legitimate process that has produced someone top of the merit tree, but we do not accept that person for whatever reason and are going to reject them and either try to appoint the second-place person or start the competition again." I suspect that, in practical terms, councillors on the transition committees would see that as leaving themselves legally very vulnerable under those circumstances. I understand the motivation behind the two-thirds majority. However, I wonder whether that might be something that will have to be looked at, because I see a degree of vulnerability with it.

That one caveat aside, I think that the Assembly as a whole should welcome the progress being made by the statutory transition committees and the regulations before us

today. I am certainly happy to lend my support to the regulations.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh na rialacha. I welcome the rules and regulations today. I want to share in some of the comments that the Minister made in recognising the contribution of councillors. Many good contributions have been made down through the years, and I share in those views. I congratulate the work of the voluntary transition committees up to now and those who have made a positive contribution to that. I commend the Minister on the political reference group, and I apologise that I did not make the last meeting. There has been a lot of good work and contributions, and it has closed some of the gaps around the fears and concerns that councillors have over the process. There has been good engagement in working with councils, and I hope that that will continue. As others said, this is one piece of the jigsaw to assist in the reform process, and it is most welcome today. It allows for the establishment of the statutory transition committees and outlines the procedures and provisions incorporated in that.

I do not want to go over everything that the Minister and Chair mentioned, but I want the Minister to clarify a couple of points. It was a wee bit noisy in the Chamber when the Minister was speaking on this matter earlier, and I could not pick him up.

4.15 pm

As regards methodology, the Minister outlined three measures. He talked not only about d'Hondt being the default mechanism but about proportionality. I want to touch on that element a wee bit. Councils have asked me how you define agreement. Will it be, as some councils have indicated, done in a way outside of those three methods? Will the Minister elaborate on how he sees that process working?

I also want to talk about Castlereagh Borough Council and Lisburn City Council. Will the people who are appointed to the statutory transition committee from those areas represent the relevant wards? Another key point that has come up in Committee relates to the appointment of the clerk or the chief executive. Minister, if we go through an open process and you appoint somebody, how will that stand up legally? If they go through an open competition and are appointed under proper procedure and it then has to go to the transition committee to

be overseen, how will that stand up legally? Can that be challenged?

With those comments made, I welcome the rules.

Mrs D Kelly: I, too, welcome the establishment of transition committees being put on a statutory footing. However, I have to say that, similar to the Chairperson, I have concerns relating to the reorganisation Bill, which we believed would be before the House before summer recess. I understand from questions in the House and elsewhere that it has been before OFMDFM since the end of April. I would be grateful if the Minister would shed some light on that matter.

We would all do well to remember the ethos and principles behind the review of public administration. It was, ultimately, aimed at saving ratepayers money. One of the first tests of any new council will be how those savings are realised. Although I welcome the Minister's quest for funding for local government to facilitate RPA, I urge him to challenge his Executive colleagues for further financial assistance in the transition from 26 to 11 councils so that ratepayers are not further burdened by the cost of change.

The Minister referred to previous meetings of the political reference group that he established. He will recall, as others may, that one of the main concerns was about the checks and balances in the making of some of the pertinent, early decisions on the appointment of senior staff and the culture and ethos of local councils. Can the Minister, having reflected on the comments of councillors and others at the last political reference group meeting, give us any further indication of how he can allay some of the concerns that were raised?

The Minister, quite rightly, paid tribute to former elected representatives in the years of conflict. That was very timely given that it is only a few days since the fortieth anniversary of the death of our party colleague Senator Paddy Wilson, who lost his life because he stood up for democratic institutions. He was not alone in that sacrifice. It is right and proper that we remember that many people put their head up when others brought violence to our streets.

I am very much of the view that all the senior-level posts must be appointed through open competition. I am encouraged by the attitude of all the parties represented in the political reference group. There seems to be broad support for the principle of open competition. There also has to be a change in the mindset

and attitude in leading councils, hopefully, to a new beginning, particularly following the planned autumn workshops on dealing with the past, sectarianism and some of the more emotive subjects such as parades. There seems to be a demand from the public and an attitude of generosity in the political reference groups so far to deal with those more complex issues. I am pleased that the regulations are before the House today and look forward to the introduction of further legislation to enable the change to happen.

Mr Elliott: Much of this legislation has centred on the appointment process for chief executives for the new councils. The Ulster Unionist Party and I support the concept of open competition. Departments may wish to look at much more open competition, but that is not for the Minister today. I welcome that aspect, which allows for a much wider pool of candidates.

When the issue was being discussed in Committee, I asked about the title and position of "clerk" as opposed to "chief executive". Departmental officials told us that the position of clerk and not chief executive is in the current legislation. It may be an appropriate time to look at that terminology because, to me and to most people in the community, the title "chief executive" is the norm as opposed to "clerk", which is still sometimes used. Perhaps the Minister should look at that in the near future. It is not an issue for this legislation but, as the reform continues, the Minister might want to look at it.

It is not a good basis for the statutory transition committees to appoint the new chief executives. The Ulster Unionist Party and I believe that the shadow councils should have that role when they are elected. They will have a year to bed in, and those are the types of decisions that the shadow councils, as opposed to the statutory transition committees, should take. We are well aware that a number of members and councillors on the statutory transition committees will not serve on the new councils. I accept that, when a chief executive retires and you need to appoint a new one coming up to the end of a term, councillors who appoint a new chief executive may not be councillors in the next term. However, those are one-off issues. In this case, all 11 chief executives will be appointed, and the shadow councils, as opposed to the statutory transition committees, should make those big decisions. I am firmly of that belief, which is why I voted against the issue in Committee.

It is quite interesting that the Local Government Staff Commission believes that the appointment

process that is outlined for chief executives in the regulations is in conflict with its procedures and processes. I was hugely disappointed to hear in Committee that the Department had not even opened discussions with the Local Government Staff Commission. That is a Department of the Environment body that was established for the very purpose of those appointments, and the Department has not even entered into any discussions with it. I understand that, since the Committee meeting last week, there have been initial discussions with the commission, but I am not sure whether an agreement can be reached. Members said that the entire statutory transition committee deciding the final appointment and requiring a two-thirds majority is not in the guidelines or resolution of the Local Government Staff Commission appointment process. They state that the powers of appointment are delegated to a small group of councillors, and they will make that decision. I assume that the Local Government Staff Commission is not currently in a position to support this. That is for the commission to say, but that is my assumption at present. I believe that this will leave the process very open to challenge. Over the past couple of years, the commission has worked very diligently to ensure that the options and opportunities for challenge were very limited, and I am concerned that this will once again open up the prospect of significant challenge. If the process indicated that a statutory transition committee required a two thirds majority, I could say that the process was OK but not the appointment. I believe that the final appointment will be subject to huge challenge if a statutory transition committee decides against the recommendation of the appointment team.

Although I welcome some aspects of the legislation, overall, the Ulster Unionist Party and I cannot support it because of those significant difficulties. Hopefully, the Minister will take on board our concerns.

Lord Morrow: We are where we are with this whole process. If we were starting with a clean sheet of paper, we would not start from here because there are a lot of disappointments and a lot that I suspect and feel could and should be done differently.

I declare that I have been a member of Dungannon and South Tyrone Borough Council since 1973. I think that I joined at the age of nine or 10, but I cannot recall — *[Laughter.]* It seems that long anyway.

I want to place on record my appreciation, and the Assembly should, I think, do the same, of the fact that councils were the only democratic

forums in this country over the long, hard years of what are now called the Troubles. The Minister and other Members were not neglectful of that. There were those who were prepared to put their head above the parapet, and, as already intimated, some paid the ultimate price and made the ultimate sacrifice. I pay tribute to those people, irrespective of where they came from or their background, for doing their duty. They wanted to play a part in the public life of their council area. Society went through difficult years, but I believe that it could have fallen apart had it not been for the local councils and councillors who gave of their best to try to keep some semblance of democracy and normality in this country. At a time of local government reform, I say to people who went through the difficult years that their efforts have not gone unnoticed and that there are those who very much appreciate what you have been doing.

There are those who, as they come to the end of their term in local government — many have spent long years there — will no longer be allowed to stand in that democratic forum because of new regulations. Whether you agree or disagree with that, the fact remains that there are many people who would have been invaluable in the new system that will take over in the not-too-distant future, but we will not be able to draw on their experience or knowledge should they also want to be in the Assembly. They have to decide where they want to be.

4.30 pm

I do not think that that exists in any other region of the United Kingdom, if my memory serves me right. This is the only region of the United Kingdom where you have to decide one way or the other. Sometimes, it is nearly put out that those who are in both tiers of government are not elected to both, but, lo and behold, all of them have been elected to both. Anyway, I am just making the point that many valuable, experienced councillors are going to be discarded as a result of this. I might say that I am not speaking of myself, because others out there have given long service to the community. I think that important things have often been done down at that grassroots level. However, now that we have the Assembly, which is another tier of local government, it has been decided that people cannot be in both places at the same time.

It is a disappointment that we do not have a Bill, and I think that we have to put that on record. At that stage, I will start to put in the question marks. Is there another stalling exercise? Are we holding back or drawing back again, or is

this due to other reasons? I am sure that the Minister will elaborate on that when he gets up to speak.

I happen to believe, and I am speaking more in a personal capacity here, that the procedure that we are going through for the transition across is totally unnecessary. It is far too elaborate and is not needed at all. You can go back to the days of the Macrory report in 1973 and look at what happened then. I do not think for a second that this all happened in 1973 to bring matters across during the reform of local government.

We are but just round the corner from the election. When we come back to the Assembly in September, the elections for local government will virtually be upon us but we still do not have a Bill. I know that there is another procedure a little later than that, but I think that it would have been good had we had the Bill before us before the recess, rather than have to wait until after.

The transition committees are also a year too late, but I suppose we have to be thankful for small mercies, and, at long last, it seems that we will get transition committees. Some of us advocated that the transition committees should have been established at least 12 months ago. However, we are where we are, and the Minister tells us today that that at least is now going to happen.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. I listened very attentively to what has been said around the Chamber. I declare an interest, in that I have been a valued member of Ards Borough Council, which is a superb council in Northern Ireland. The issue is that if the Bill does not come through the House, the possibility is that the election may have to be deferred until after 2014. If that is the case, some radical thinking will have to take place about why that has happened and who is responsible.

Lord Morrow: I take the Member's point that he is a valuable member of one of the local councils. I trust that all his colleagues are valued members, as indeed, I hope, all councillors are valued members of their local council. I take the point that the Member is trying to make: yes, it might be good just to ascertain why, in the course of events, we have no Bill. I have little doubt that the Minister will tell us — before 5.00 pm today, probably — why we do not have a Bill. We will not have to wait that long. I take the point that the Member is trying to raise.

I think that it would be wrong to let the transition committees make the appointments of chief executives for the new councils. I ask the Minister to take another look at that one. Over the summer recess, when he has a wee bit more time on his hands, he might just want to reflect on that and see where it takes us.

Mr McCarthy said that the elections will perhaps have to be postponed again, and that would not be good either. We have had one six-year period of local government, and we are well into the next one. I do not think that it would be good for local government to have another postponement of elections. However, time may well catch up with us. As I said earlier, we are where we are, but it is not looking good. I suspect that the Minister will want to put as much power behind this as he possibly can to ensure that the process travels at the time and speed that hopefully we all want.

I come from an area that had a transition committee in operation, although I was not a member of it. However, the Mid-Ulster transition committee operated very well. I suspect that a better way to put it would be to say that it operated better than most. Now that this is going to happen, I hope that the Minister and his Department will keep a watching brief on the different transition committees as they set about doing their job, because they have an important job to do. They have the job of propelling this forward, and they may well end up carrying the can at the end of the day if things do not happen, and that would be unfair. The Committee will give whatever support that it can to encourage the whole process to keep going, with the proviso that the appointment of chief executives might need to be looked at long and hard before we give over the entire responsibility for their appointment to the transition committees. That would not be good, and I hope that the Department will look again at the whole process.

However, with some reservations, I support what is in front of us today. It is up to the Minister now to prove us all wrong. Let us see that we need not be cautious that things will fly from this day forth and go past us like a whirlwind. Let us see the Minister holding on tight and carrying the whole thing through. I wish him well.

Mr Attwood: I thank all Members for their contributions, and I thank the Committee for all its work. I will try to deal with the points succinctly.

I confirm to Anna Lo and Mr Boylan that guidance will state that we encourage people to

use d'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë or single transferable vote for the proportionality requirement around membership of the STCs, because we cannot put this into law for various reasons. However, if a cluster of councils comes to the Department to say that there is an enhanced model of proportionality that moves beyond any of the three recommended models, the Department will not desist. If that is the case, the more the better. Larne Borough Council has abandoned all those models of proportionality and has a model of proportionality that drives and embeds in the life of the council the allocation of positions and the payment of allowances. That model is proportionality is plus, plus, plus. If people want to go there, they will have the full encouragement of the Department.

The appointment of chief executives is very demanding stuff. You are walking on eggs, and you may well be walking on legal eggs. Anything that has been proposed has been interrogated legally, not least because there is a political consensus around this room and other rooms that there should be open and full competition for the post of chief executive in the new councils. That has been widely endorsed, but there is legal opinion from others to suggest that it cannot be done, is problematic, or might open up legal challenge, so I have been very cautious and highly vigilant in taking legal and other advice on the process. On the far side of that legal advice, given my own judgement and that shared in many places, we believe that open competition for the post is right. What will be done? How will it be done? I do not know what this comment is that the staff commission has not been involved. I get various pieces of correspondence from the commission and have had various pieces of correspondence from it in recent times. The Environment Committee has also had pieces of correspondence from the commission in recent times, and it seems to me that it is a bit contradictory, but that is for them to explain.

Nonetheless, there have been conversations with the commission, and there will be more conversations with it, because it has a statutory role, it will continue to have a statutory role, and we are not trying to usurp that statutory role.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: I will give way in a second. The commission will have a statutory role in the process, but what is the process for the appointment of the chief executives? Some details are still being worked through. It is proposed that there will be one competition, and that those who apply for the post of chief

executive will indicate the post in which they are interested. Maybe they will be interested in 11 posts, or maybe they will be interested in one, but the statutory transition committees in a cluster will appoint an interview panel.

There will be the normal processes and legal processes for the assessment of those who might be subject to further assessment, and those who are identified for that purpose will be subject to an assessment centre. After that assessment centre, there will be an interview, and, on the far side of that, there will be a decision.

The decision will be that one person, and one person alone, will be nominated from the interviewing panel to the statutory transition committee, and the statutory transition committee will have to make the judgement. If they choose not to ratify, and if they are not satisfied that the process has been fair and open, they can reject that person; in which case, the competition will be rerun. If they reject somebody, and, in my view or the Department's view, they have not acted properly, in that the process has been fair and open and that there was no reason not to ratify, if a council decides not to ratify in those circumstances, the Department will step in.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for giving way. My point was merely about his comment in relation to the staff commission not being involved or not having discussions with the Department. I made my comment when I referred to that coming from the basis of your departmental officials who had indicated at the Committee last week that there had not been any discussions with the Local Government Staff Commission around the process that was being used. That was merely my comment.

Mr Attwood: There have been discussions with what is known as the joint forum, and there have been discussions, if not latterly, certainly recently, with the staff commission, not least because it has forwarded various pieces of correspondence, and we have been trying to understand fully what people may be indicating. Issues about human resources, be they legal, operational, or the relationships between ourselves and other organisations, are dealt with on a rolling basis, and I have not been informed that the staff commission heretofore has had some big headaches about how the Department has conducted itself in that regard.

On the far side of all those processes, people have to take legal advice and decide what their legal options are. My sense is that people know that this is a once-in-a-political-lifetime

opportunity to get council reform right, and that has been touched on by a lot of people in this discussion. I do not like some of the details of council reform. I still do not like having 11 rather than 15 councils. I would much prefer it had that piece of advice prevailed earlier, as managing all this would have been more straightforward. Nonetheless, if you look at what has been achieved over the past 18 months compared to what was done in the previous 18 years, or even in the previous mandate, the scale of what has been achieved is far in excess of what happened before. I think that, at political, official, management and leadership levels in the councils, people do not want to see this process derailed. Whatever its fault lines and flaws, whatever its challenges and demands, they do not want to see it derailed.

4.45 pm

I will give you a small example. In the past few weeks, my senior planning team has spent a lot of time going around all the divisional planning offices to explain to planning staff not only more about the character and content of the planning system, and its role in Northern Ireland, but where we are going over the next 700 days in the run down to local council reform. What has been the consequence of that? I am getting reports of planning staff being enthused and encouraged on the transition by council staff. I will not name the chief executive of one of the local councils, for example, arising from one of the meetings last week — maybe a chief executive who is not going to apply for appointment to the new clusters — who was enthusiastic in saying to planning staff that the planning function cannot come soon enough within the life of a council, because of what it might mean for councillors shaping their own communities. So, I do not think that there is any sense that people are going to gather now and try to derail any bit of this process, including the process that has been proposed in respect of chief executives. I hope that that spirit will prevail over the next number of months.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for giving way. To my mind, training for future councillors on the new councils will be vital as we go forward, but, to my knowledge, that process has not even started.

Mr Attwood: I am sorry to correct the valued member of his local council —

Mr McCarthy: I am always open to being corrected.

Mr Attwood: I hope, then, that the Member will take kindly this correction. Here I go, and this is why I am a bit surprised about some stuff about the staff commission, but the NAC, NILGA and the staff commission came into the office together, about six weeks ago, to make their contribution to shaping the training of councillors, senior managers and other staff in the run down to RPA. That is only one example of a process that has been going on for a number of months, and which will conclude by the end of July. We have been scoping out what the training requirements and other requirements of councillors, management and officials might be across the range of DOE functions. I will give you a small example. I believe that there is an urgent need to have proper training in the run down to community planning being part of the life of the new councils going forward. Community Places, the community-planning organisation that is citizen-focused, is taking forward that work. It is working with the chief executive of Ballymena council in order to ensure that, when it comes to community planning, which is somewhat abstract at the moment, that function is shaped properly, so that the councils are fully empowered and enabled to take that forward in 2015. I could go on. I hope that the Member will take those comments in the spirit in which they are intended.

I was asked why we did not have a local government Bill before the House. I think it is probably too late now, because we are not sitting tomorrow, but DOE has an ambition to introduce 10 Bills in the lifetime of this mandate. That is not precluding something that might come out in the run down to 2016, which will be the end of this mandate, if the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is passed by Westminster. I hope it is not, in that regard, because I do not think you can usurp democracy in this part of the world. However, in my view, there was an attempt to usurp the full outworkings of democracy in the Chamber last week with regard to the Planning Bill. Putting that aside, there are at least 10 Bills that DOE has ambition to get through the Assembly in the lifetime of this mandate, regardless of whether it is four or five years.

It was my hope, and I have always said, that we would have, at various stages, a Marine Bill, a road traffic Bill, a local government Bill, a Planning Bill and the Second Stage of the Carrier Bags Bill in the legislative process of this mandate before the summer. A road traffic (amendment) Bill and a local government Bill have been circulating among the Executive for a number of weeks — a lot of weeks — and, despite my expectation, even on walking into

Executive meetings, that they would be on the agenda, they have not appeared. As Members might know, others perhaps see the agenda of Executive meetings before some parties do, but for me and other parties, including the Member's party, the first sight we have of an Executive agenda is when we walk into the meeting and sit down.

Mr Eastwood: Team players.

Mr Attwood: As the Member has just pointed out, that suggests that there is a lot of team playing going on round the Executive table. Putting that aside, there was ample opportunity for the local government Bill to go through the Executive and come to the Floor, not just for its First Stage but for its Second Stage, so that it could go to Anna Lo's Committee in advance of the summer.

The mind of Executive members who are transferring functions have, historically and currently, been concentrated on the issue given that their Departments are transferring. Therefore, it seems to me that, in those Departments, when it came to an Executive paper's being circulated, they were more nimble on their feet with regard to what its contents might be and they responded very promptly.

There was a legislative issue. I think that I indicated that in the Chamber previously. It arose in respect of — and we need to get this right — TUPE obligations. That required some last-minute work, four or five weeks ago, with the Office of the Legislative Counsel. However, it was corrected.

I have to say that although I understand, given the volume of papers around the Executive, that Ministers might respond late to certain matters, last Thursday, one Minister responded to matters. We tried to give that Minister immediate reassurance. I am glad to say that the Minister indicated that he was satisfied. I also have to say that I hope that no game-playing is going on with respect to the local government Bill. I hope that, given that, for example, a process has been established by the FM and dFM to address the issue of flags, no Minister is now trying to parachute the flags issue into the local government Bill at this stage. It may come to pass that the flags issue will have to be dealt with on the Floor of the Chamber through the Bill. It is not sustainable to walk into the formation of the new councils in 700 days' time without the issue of flags having been resolved satisfactorily. Otherwise, the first item of business in too many councils will be the display of flags. That will not be a very healthy start to the life of the new councils given

the ambitions of councillors and the needs of local ratepayers. I want to put it on record that I hope that no Minister is now looking for the issue of flags to be dealt with at this stage through the local government Bill.

Mr Weir, Mrs Kelly and Mr Boylan, who referred to it, and other Members sit on the political reference subgroup. As they are aware, I raised the issue of the display of flags in the context that I just outlined at two recent meetings. We stepped back from that issue because a process, whatever its character might be, has now been initiated by the FM and dFM to deal with some legacy issues, including that of flags. That is where it should be dealt with for now. If that does not lead to a satisfactory outcome, it should be dealt with in another way. However, the local government Bill should not be derailed by any issue around flags at this stage.

With regard to Mr Weir's comments, I think that there is relentless momentum now towards RPA. That momentum has been gathering because of decisions around money, the transfer of functions, STCs, council severance, and so on. Regarding the potential for more money from the Executive, which Mrs Kelly touched on, I want to say very clearly that I do not want to hold out any hope or expectation that that will happen. The previous position had been that there would be no central assistance. Then, close to £50 million was allocated. I cannot offer any hope or expectation that that situation will be revisited.

Over the weekend, I wrote a letter to the chief executives and chairs of councils further to a recent meeting that I had with ICE representatives, which is the sharing and collaboration team of local councils, expressing explicitly my dissatisfaction with their response to sharing and collaboration opportunities in the next 18 months. Further to a meeting that I had with them two months ago, a letter had come back that said very little. Basically, it said that any more or significant sharing and collaboration of substance would have to wait until after 2015. It is not the message to send out to ratepayers that sharing and collaboration will, substantially, be done in two years' time or later.

I made it very clear to them that I expected a lot more good authority from the councils. That is why I wrote the letter not just to the chief executives but to the chairs of the councils. As Mr Weir and others will confirm, at the political reference subgroup, I raised the point that councils have to take the lead in driving forward sharing and collaboration.

Mr Weir also raised a question — Anna Lo touched on this — about whether there will be a vacuum between the function of the incoming chief executive and the existing one. No, there will not. The new chief executive will be tasked under the regulations to take a lead in key responsibilities, including the preparation of a business plan, a corporate plan and a financial plan. Those are major undertakings. At the same time, the existing chief executive will have ongoing operational responsibility for the delivery of services in the run-down to March 2015. So, whilst they will have to have good relations, they both have defined, demanding jobs. In my view, there will be no vacuum. The issue is that the roles are different under the law, so multiple responsibilities will fall to both, and they will need to apply themselves diligently to those responsibilities.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Ms Lo: What will happen if the existing chief executive is appointed as the new chief executive for the new council?

Mr Attwood: Once we have worked through all these issues, I will give you the definitive answer. The point of principle remains that there will not be a vacuum. Existing and incoming chief executives will have a lot of work to do. The roles will be defined differently — one is operational, and one is about shaping the life of the future council. In my view, that will work satisfactorily. However, the Member makes a fair point. Will you have a person who is master of neither house, and will there be a tension in that regard? Once all that has been worked through, we will get an answer to the Member.

Mr Boylan raised a question about Castlereagh and Lisburn councils. There might be a slight confusion. I think that there are two issues behind that question. The first is that there is a dispute between Castlereagh and Lisburn councils about the balance of membership on the STC. Both have been looking at me. I have to point out that half of Lisburn City Council's members are from the ranks of the DUP and that all but half of Castlereagh Borough Council's members are from the ranks of the DUP. So, if they cannot work that out at a party and council level, I do not think that I can work it out for them. With all due respect to them, that is why I have resisted meeting them separately or together, because they need to work out that issue at a local level. If they cannot work it out or accept the fact that there

will be equivalent members from both councils, whatever the disproportion in population size, and agree that that needs to happen, in my view, neither is sending out very good authority, and the party that seems to have a leadership role on those two councils is sending out some strange messages.

The other point that the Member makes is that Castlereagh and Lisburn councils will transfer areas to Belfast City Council. In the guidance that will be issued further to the regulations, there will be a requirement for the people who sit on the Belfast STC to be elected members from the DEAs or wards that are transferring into Belfast. Therefore you cannot have a person from a political tradition that is contrary to the political tradition of, for example, Poleglass sitting on the statutory transition committee in Belfast.

Tom Elliott made the good point that there should be more open competition, and I agree with that. In my own time in the Department, I remember getting advice on the appointment of the Environment Agency chief executive. That is a grade 3 post, so there is really only one post above that in the Civil Service hierarchy. As far as I recall, the advice was to have an internal competition, but I said, "No. Let us have an open and full competition. If there are strong internal or external candidates, let us test all that". We ended up with someone who came to Belfast from Australia. That sends out a strong message that we recognise that there are a lot of good people within and a lot of good people outside. We are taking that model forward for the competition.

5.00 pm

There is the issue about town clerks and chief executives. Under the legislation at the moment, it is town clerk. It would be a logistical nightmare to delete or redact references to chief executives, never mind the confusion that Belfast, Lisburn and Newry are cities, and they all have town clerks. It may be better that we do not go there, although I understand the sentiment behind what was said. I assure people that we will work with the Local Government Staff Commission as we go forward.

I am sure that I have not touched on a number of points, but I aimed to finish by 5.00 pm. I agree with the sentiment of the comments made by Lord Morrow. I recognise that those who are leaving may not want to leave council life, never mind those who have already left and those who have gone to other places. All those

people need to be recognised, and nothing is intended as any criticism of them.

I outlined my plan for the Bill. I regret that the Bill will not even have its First Reading before the summer. Lord Morrow's final remark was "Who will carry the can?". I am not into "Who will carry the can?". Even with my reservations, I am into getting this done right and on time. Who will carry the can if this does not live up to all those standards? The ratepayers. They will have a reduced or worse service than expected or a service that is too costly or does not live up to the requirements of the transfer of functions, especially in planning. They will carry the can, and, as democrats and public servants, we say that the last people who should have to do that are the public.

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 77; Noes 13.

AYES

Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Byrne, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Rogers, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mrs McKeivitt

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Elliott, Mr Gardiner, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mrs Overend, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Cree and Mr Elliott

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Local Government (Statutory Transition Committees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be approved.

5.15 pm

Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2)(a), 19, 20 and 20(1)

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next four motions relate to amendments to Standing Orders, so I propose to conduct the debate as follows. I propose to group motions (a) to (d) as detailed in the Order Paper and conduct a single debate. I will call the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures to move the first motion in the group. Debate will then take place on all four motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on motion (a). I will then ask the Chairperson to move formally motions (b) to (d) in turn, and I will put the Question on each motion without further debate. If that is clear, we will proceed.

Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): I beg to move

After Standing Order 20 insert

"20A. Topical Questions

(1) Topical questions for a Minister shall be taken during the first 15 minutes of the time allocated for questions for oral answer by that Minister.

(2) No topical questions shall be asked of the Assembly Commission.

(3) A member who wishes to ask a topical question of a Minister at a particular sitting shall submit his or her name in advance to the Speaker who shall select 10 members by ballot.

(4) The Speaker shall determine, by means of a random selection, the order in which questions are taken.

(5) The Speaker shall inform –

(a) members; and

(b) the Ministers to whom the questions will be addressed at the sitting;

in advance, of the names and order in which questions are to be taken.

(6) Answers may not be debated, but the member asking the question may ask a supplementary question. A supplementary

question may contain no more than one enquiry.

(7) *Where a member is not present to ask a topical question, the Speaker shall move to the next member in accordance with the order determined under paragraph (4).*

(8) *Paragraphs (1)(a) and (2) of Standing Order 19 and paragraphs (2), (8A), (10) and (11) of Standing Order 20 shall apply to topical questions as they apply to questions for oral answer."*

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

(b) In Standing Order 10(2)(a) leave out "and 20A" and insert "to 20B". — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(c) Leave out Standing Order 19(3) and insert

"(3) A question may be –

(a) for oral answer (see Standing Order 20);

(b) a topical question for oral answer (see Standing Order 20A);

(c) for urgent oral answer (see Standing Order 20B); or

(d) for written answer (see Standing Order 20C)."

In Standing Order 19(4) line 1, after "question" insert "(other than a topical question)". — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(d) In Standing Order 20(1) leave out subparagraphs (a) and (b) and the hyphen immediately preceding them and insert

"2.00 pm and 3.30 pm on those Mondays and Tuesdays". — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee on Procedures, I am pleased to bring these motions to amend Standing Orders to the House today. On 15 April, the Assembly approved the Committee on Procedures' report on its inquiry into topical questions. The motions will give effect to the recommendations in the Committee's report. Motion (a) inserts a new Standing Order that sets out the topical questions procedure. Motions (b), (c) and (d) are consequential amendments.

I will make a few comments about motion (a), which proposes new Standing Order 20A. If the amendments to Standing Orders are agreed, topical questions will form part of the existing Question Time rota, with Ministers now having 45 minutes each time they are scheduled to answer oral questions. The Minister will answer topical questions during the first 15 minutes and, at the end of that time or when all topical questions have been asked, whichever is earlier, business can move immediately to the 30-minute Question Time for the same Minister.

Members will recall that the Committee's report had recommended a deadline of three working days in advance of the relevant Topical Question Time for submission of names to the Speaker. Although new Standing Order 20A(3) does not specify this deadline, it states:

"A member ... shall submit his or her name in advance to the Speaker".

This is in line with established convention and mirrors the current wording of the Standing Orders regarding questions for oral answer. As exists for current Standing Orders, a Speaker's ruling will be issued in respect of the new Standing Orders that will set out the detailed arrangements, including the deadlines to be adhered to. For the same reasons, new Standing Order 20A(5) does not specify the 1.00 pm deadline for notifying Members and Ministers of the names selected and the order in which questions are to be taken. The time frame for this will also be set out in the Speaker's ruling.

Motion (d) extends Question Time to include 15 minutes for answering topical questions and gives effect to the Committee's recommendation that starting times for Question Time on Mondays and Tuesdays should be synchronised. In short, that means that questions to the relevant Ministers, including topical questions and oral questions, would run for 45-minute slots from 2.00 pm to 3.30 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Further to the proposed Standing Orders before the House today, an important recommendation in the Committee's report was that the new arrangements should be reviewed by the Committee on Procedures following a six-month trial period. That will ensure that the objectives of introducing topical questions are being met and that the process can be revised if necessary. Subject to the approval of the Standing Orders before us today, this requirement has been built into the Committee on Procedures work programme for early in 2014.

The introduction of topical questions provides a real opportunity to improve spontaneity and will give Members the chance to pursue issues that matter to them. The hope is that questioning will be more relevant, timely and more interesting for our constituents. It is the Committee's view that these Standing Orders accurately reflect the recommendations, which were agreed by this House, in the Committee's report. Therefore, I commend the motions to the House.

Mr Lyttle: On behalf of the Alliance Party I support the proposals before the House on the introduction of Topical Question Time. As a member of the Committee on Procedures, which proposed the inquiry into topical questions, I am very pleased to see this business before the Assembly today.

It is my hope that the introduction of topical questions will lead to a more spontaneous and relevant questioning of Ministers in the Assembly. I know that it is hard to please everybody in the House and the Back-Benchers behind me may not totally agree, but I hope that this will improve the accountability of many of the Ministers to the public whom we are here to serve.

I also hope that this will be one way for MLAs to get answers from Ministers who, increasingly, seem determined to avoid answering written questions in a timely manner. I know that Alliance Party Ministers welcome the introduction of topical questions and look forward to responding to them.

This will be a positive step for the Assembly in improving the way in which our legislature operates. I hope that the public will welcome the introduction of topical questions.

I thank the staff of the Committee on Procedures, who worked diligently in helping Committee members to conduct our inquiry, and all the contributors to the inquiry. It may take some adjustment to start with, but I am confident that over time it will be viewed as having provided MLAs with a beneficial tool to uphold good government and democracy in the interests of the public in Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak in the debate. I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures, Mr Trevor Clarke to conclude and make a winding-up speech.

Mr Clarke (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures): As there have

been only two contributors to the debate, whose speeches have been very short, it leaves me with little to say other than to thank, as did Chris Lyttle, the Committee staff for the support that they provided throughout the Committee's inquiry.

It is also worth noting that, although some Members might suggest that there could have been friction with Ministers, the proposals were sent to the Executive, which had no hesitation in supporting them. The Chairperson has pointed out that there will be a six-month trial period. We look forward to the principles taking effect and hope that there will be spontaneous questions that will satisfy the appetite of some Members who believe that, maybe, questions are not spontaneous. I support the motions, as they accurately reflect the recommendations of the Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to the Question, I remind Members that each motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

After Standing Order 20 insert

"20A. Topical Questions

(1) Topical questions for a Minister shall be taken during the first 15 minutes of the time allocated for questions for oral answer by that Minister.

(2) No topical questions shall be asked of the Assembly Commission.

(3) A member who wishes to ask a topical question of a Minister at a particular sitting shall submit his or her name in advance to the Speaker who shall select 10 members by ballot.

(4) The Speaker shall determine, by means of a random selection, the order in which questions are taken.

(5) The Speaker shall inform –

(a) members; and

(b) the Ministers to whom the questions will be addressed at the sitting

in advance, of the names and order in which questions are to be taken.

(6) *Answers may not be debated, but the member asking the question may ask a supplementary question. A supplementary question may contain no more than one enquiry.*

(7) *Where a member is not present to ask a topical question, the Speaker shall move to the next member in accordance with the order determined under paragraph (4).*

(8) *Paragraphs (1)(a) and (2) of Standing Order 19 and paragraphs (2), (8A), (10) and (11) of Standing Order 20 shall apply to topical questions as they apply to questions for oral answer."*

Mr Deputy Speaker: The remaining motions in the group will be moved in turn and voted on without further debate.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 10(2)(a) leave out "and 20A" and insert "to 20B". — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

Leave out Standing Order 19(3) and insert

"(3) A question may be –

(a) for oral answer (see Standing Order 20);

(b) a topical question for oral answer (see Standing Order 20A);

(c) for urgent oral answer (see Standing Order 20B); or

(d) for written answer (see Standing Order 20C)."

In Standing Order 19(4) line 1, after "question" insert "(other than a topical question)". — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

Resolved (with cross-community support):

In Standing Order 20(1) leave out subparagraphs (a) and (b) and the hyphen immediately preceding them and insert

"2.00 pm and 3.30 pm on those Mondays and Tuesdays". — [Mr G Kelly (The Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures).]

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

North/South Co-operation

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for this debate. As two amendments have been selected and published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes have been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, the House should note that the amendments cannot both be made as they are mutually exclusive. So, if amendment No 1 is made, the Question on amendment No 2 will not be put.

Mr McDevitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the ambition, values and institutions borne out of the Belfast Agreement; notes the improved working relationship between the Governments on this island including through the North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council; welcomes the recent progress on the Narrow Water bridge project; and calls on the Executive, in conjunction with the British and Irish Governments, to complete urgently the review of the St Andrews Agreement to allow further progress on North/South co-operation in order to bring benefits to all of the people of this island.

As we have been remembering frequently in recent months, 15 years ago our region was given the opportunity to start over. This institution was founded on power sharing, equality and respect for the diversity between our people. We have grown this institution. We have found ways of being able to ensure that the people in this region of Ireland have stable government and have the capacity to hold that government to account within the rules, as they are today.

5.30 pm

That was one part of what we voted for — those of us who voted yes. I am very pleased that the vast majority of the House is still full of parties that voted yes and supported not just the working of the institutions of our agreement, but took the brave decision back in 1998 to set

aside a period of conflict and division, and to start over by establishing institutions that, today, everyone is capable of supporting.

It is important that we understand that these institutions were never meant to — and do not — exist in isolation. As John Hume used to say, there are three broken sets of relationships in our conflict.

Mr Campbell: Oh, please.

Mr McDevitt: First, a broken relationship between the people of Northern Ireland, which, despite the heckles from my colleagues and some friends in the DUP, we are slowly working to restore. Secondly, a broken relationship between the peoples of Ireland, and, thirdly, broken relationships between Britain and Ireland.

I know that everyone in this House was particularly pleased to note and appreciate the significance of the Queen's recent visit to the Republic of Ireland. I know that everyone in the House was aware, more than most, of the importance of healing the division and mistrust, and restoring full relationships between the two sovereign Governments that we all hold dear.

Mr Campbell: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will in a second, Mr Campbell, if I could just get my preliminary remarks out of the way.

We have a great duty not to simply fall back on the Governments to show leadership but to continue ourselves, as an Assembly, in co-operation with the Government in Dublin, to build on the common ground on this island: on the areas of common interest. We have a duty to deepen our relationships not because we are pursuing some political agenda, but because it is in the interests of all our people.

The co-operation that is now blossoming in the area of health is a product of the infrastructure and institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, but it is made to work because of the leadership of a DUP Minister. That is leadership that no one should be afraid to celebrate. I want to thank the Health Minister, as I have many times in this House, for taking the right decisions in the interests of the people of Northern Ireland to co-operate and deepen co-operation with the rest of the island in the interests of our people.

I also want to acknowledge the leadership that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has shown in the area of tourism.

Only last week, she noted in this House that the G8 summit was not only known around the world for not having had a big riot, but for the work that Tourism Ireland did to ensure that the message about Fermanagh as a destination reached everywhere we needed it to reach. The beauty and majesty of Lough Erne, our heritage and our land was showcased to every single journalist who came here. That would not be possible without the Good Friday Agreement. Those opportunities would not have existed without these institutions, and these institutions would not work except in the context of British-Irish institutions and North/South institutions. I give way to Mr Campbell.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Member for giving way. Unfortunately, at the moment, he is coming close to saying that these institutions would not be here unless the SDLP's prerequisites had been met, which would be a very invidious position to take. Had a unionist taken such a position, I think that he would have something to say.

Is it not the case that his argument in the debate today would be far more progressive if he simply indicated that what is done is done, whatever our various opinions on it? We should be talking about 2013 and how we will make progress from here on, rather than going back to something that happened 15 years ago and over which most people have drawn a veil and said, "That's done and dusted. Let's have a good future, rather than the failures of the past."

Mr McDevitt: This is progress indeed, Mr Speaker. Maybe I could acknowledge Mr Campbell's determination to look forward, and I wish to do so. In fact, the purpose of the motion is not to be retrospective about the decision and mandate that the people gave us all to establish these institutions in 1998, but to look forward to how we develop co-operation on the island of Ireland, and to do so specifically within an agreement that the two major parties of this House are party to — the St Andrews Agreement — and to acknowledge that that agreement included a commitment, set out with terms of reference, to review properly, intelligently, soberly and in an objective way the opportunities for future development on North/South co-operation. For the benefit of the House, I will read into the record the terms of reference of the St Andrews Agreement review:

"1. To examine ... the efficiency and value for money of existing Implementation Bodies;

2. To examine objectively the case for additional bodies and areas of co-operation within the NSMC where mutual benefit would be derived; and

3. To input into the work on the identification of a suitable substitute for the proposed Lights Agency of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission."

Those are challenging terms of reference. They are about taking "North/Southerly" to another level that is not anything to do with the political aspirations of one side or other represented here; it is to do with maximising the opportunity for that co-operation for our people. The reason the motion is before us is that, some not insignificant number of years since that agreement was reached and those terms of reference established, we are still awaiting the outcome of the St Andrews review.

It is timely that we should be debating this today. On Friday, the North/South Ministerial Council will meet in plenary session. Our appeal, and I would hope the appeal of the House through its democratic decision, if it chooses to support the motion, is to say to the Irish Government and the Northern Executive that the time to see the review is overdue. Our wish is not to play "North/Southerly" like a political football across our border. Our wish is to seize on the fantastic, real and positive work that is going on and to accept that now is the time to allow that work to deepen, where it needs to; to change, where it makes sense to change it; to be added to, where it makes sense to do so; and to allow it to be held up to all our people, not in some threatening way, but as a real way of being able to get your operation quicker, to get better transport links, to better protect our environment, to better manage our sustainable and energy opportunities into the decades ahead, and to make our island safer. It is for that reason that the SDLP has come here today to ask colleagues on all sides not to look back — I think that Mr Campbell is absolutely right — but to look forward and say loudly and clearly that North/South co-operation, like east-west co-operation and like making these institutions work, is not something we do because we have to, but something we do because we know we need to, we want to and the people require us to.

Mr Moutray: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"notes the working relationship between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish

Government, including through the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and other bilateral contacts; and welcomes ongoing, practical co-operation that is beneficial to the people of Northern Ireland."

We are living in a time of financial hardship. Every day, when we turn on the news or pick up a newspaper, we hear of hardship, job losses and struggles, whether on our own shores, in the European Union or across the world. Indeed, we all know individuals, families and businesses that are struggling. That said, I believe that it is important that we open up and explore all methods of improving our business competitiveness, particularly in exporting goods, whether it be to the Irish Republic, given that we share a land border, or further afield. Hence, our amendment reaffirms the DUP's commitment to working with whoever to try to benefit the people of Northern Ireland. Devolved government in Northern Ireland has and continues to deliver for the people. Although I mentioned the difficult times, I believe that local Ministers making decisions, particularly around economic issues, are best placed. The benefits far outweigh direct rule.

We have to think only of the level of job creation brought about by Invest NI and Minister Foster. I think of the recent announcement of 279 jobs at Almac in Craigavon. That is what political stability is about, and that is the course that we, as a party, are on.

Constitutionally, Northern Ireland is in the United Kingdom; let us be clear on that. Mr McDevitt and Mr Bradley are endeavouring to do some political grandstanding with the motion, but they have to be mindful that attempts to bring about a united Ireland are failing miserably. Northern Ireland continues to be an integral part of the United Kingdom. Given the more peaceful environment that we have enjoyed in recent years, it has become a serious player worldwide. We have seen great interest from China, America and, recently, Japan, which recognise our superb skills base, excellent work ethic and infrastructure benefits.

It is only now that we in Northern Ireland are confident enough to show our wares and promote this region as an economic hub. Our place within the United Kingdom gives us greater credibility on the world stage. We have only to consider that, 20 years ago, the G8 summit would just not have happened here. It gives us a greater economic trading base and a highly regarded and renowned economy that is known and respected worldwide. We have a currency that is buoyant, unlike the euro. We have a healthcare service that is free at the

point of use, and our block grant from Westminster is certainly a welcome benefit. However, we share a land border with the Republic of Ireland, and we must use it to the benefit of our people. It is necessary, in the coming months and years, to build on the practical co-operation that already exists. I commend the co-operation between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. Indeed, I believe that that co-operation has benefited and will benefit both jurisdictions in the world marketplace.

The current First Minister and the previous First Minister have always been consistent in their view that there is a need for practical co-operation rather than the often unnecessary structural and politically motivated relationship that has been and is preferred by others in the House. Each Member knows that closer collaboration in areas such as improved workforce skills and productivity, better transport links and improved public sector infrastructure in other areas should benefit consumers in both countries. To that end, I support practical co-operation. Obvious examples are electricity and gas network co-operation and the creation of better transport links to facilitate trade and labour mobility, all of which will enhance our attractiveness to foreign investors. We all know the benefits of the A1 in accessing Dublin and vice versa; that is a positive example of economic co-operation.

The Republic of Ireland clearly remains an important market for Northern Ireland firms. Although good work is being done by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, I would like more competition and co-operation between firms in both countries. That means continuing to upgrade the infrastructure in both jurisdictions, including the key transport corridors. Investment is also needed in the skills of our workforces to ensure that those skills are transferable and are recognised in both jurisdictions. That does not require political meddling but simply requires the business sector to become more closely involved with our FE colleges and universities.

We have come some distance in Northern Ireland. We have become more outward-looking, more innovative and more productive. Undoubtedly, co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic can continue to be beneficial to both jurisdictions. There will be times when we are in competition. However, we must continue to talk to our counterparts in the Republic to improve our position further in the world economy while keeping our separate identity and autonomy when bidding and doing business worldwide.

Mr Allister: I beg to move amendment No 2:

Leave out all after "commitment" and insert

"to practical cross-border co-operation but regards the elaborate North/South bodies established under the Belfast Agreement as neither necessary nor value for money."

Members will note that the amendment does not take issue with practical, pragmatic, mutually beneficial cross-border co-operation. It takes issue with the squander of the elaborate North/South arrangements and challenges whether those are necessary for that practical co-operation and whether they are value for money. On both counts, they fail the pragmatism test.

We live in a time when all of us are very familiar with the pressures that our constituents live under and the pressures that our economy operates under. In a time of austerity, we are constantly being told of the requirement for savings, and we had more indications of that earlier today. Yet, within that framework, there seems to be a group of North/South bodies and arrangements that are immune, by and large, from all of that and cost us, according to the current Northern Ireland Estimates, a total of £33 million a year. Where, I ask, is the £33 million of added value from those institutions that would not equally be available at the end of a telephone or in a conference call? The reality is that, for practical and pragmatic co-operation, you need the respective Ministers, where there is a mutual interest, to simply have a working —

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

5.45 pm

Mr Allister: When I get into this point, I will give way.

They simply need a working relationship whereby they can, at any time, speak about and resolve an issue. That does not require spending over £1 million a year on a vanity project such as the North/South Ministerial Council. It does not require us spending £32 million a year on all the intergovernmental structures of "North/Southerly". It simply requires a common-sense approach.

How many times have we been in the House and got reports from some of these institutional meetings in which the typing is double-spaced to make it look as though something actually happened? If you took out the coffee breaks or the lunch, the meeting was probably over in 20

minutes because there was nothing to talk about, yet we pour millions upon millions into those structures. Meanwhile, in my constituency and in others, care homes are to be closed, schools are being closed and hospitals are crying out for expenditure. However, when it comes to the sacred cows of the North/South bodies, we have squander and no limit to the lavishing upon them of funding to the extent that I have spoken of. Then, we are told that they are accountable.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. We have heard today about going backwards and going forwards, and it is nice to see that the Member for North Antrim has changed his stance and supports North/South work. Given his support for the North/South institutions and the mutual benefit from those, if he had a place on them, would he make a case on the basis of mutual benefit about how the Garda Síochána is now advertising for recruits and the default position is that the person applying must have Gaelic as one of their languages, not only English?

Mr Allister: First, this Member has made no change in his position on North/South co-operation. I have always recognised that, where it is practical and sensible, you do it, but you do it at a ministerial level without the need for any of this whatsoever.

As for the Garda Síochána, I have trouble enough trying to keep up with what the PSNI is trying to do sometimes, but, if the honourable Member is right about that, it is indicative of how one-way a process this is. That has been a trend of much of this "North/Southery". It serves a political agenda, not a practical agenda. It ticks boxes of sentiment for the SDLP, Sinn Féin and others, but it adds no value and gives no practical return to anyone.

The degree to which the bodies are sacred cows is illustrated by a number of financial issues, one of which is their pension arrangements. They are in a pension scheme in which the employer can, as in the case of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), pay up to 31.2% of salary into a pension fund and the employee pays 1.5%. Compare that with the Civil Service in Northern Ireland, where we have rising employee contributions and falling employer contributions. Yet, because and for no reason other than that they are North/South bodies, they have this special treatment and this special provision. Think of it: paying almost a third of salary into a pension fund under the North/South arrangement. It is that sort of squander that has given them the bad name

that they already deserve because of the fact that, practically, they do very little for anyone.

We are supposed to now then have them in an accountability state. They are supposed to be accountable. Look at today: we had a statement earlier from the Agriculture Minister on a meeting that took place on 3 May. Here we are on 1 July, two months later, before the Minister thinks that the House even needs to hear such little as did go on at that meeting. That shows the contempt for accountability. Likewise, we had inland waterways and the language body institutional meetings on 19 June. When is the House to hear about them? September. It is certainly not on the list for us to hear about them tomorrow. We had the trade and the tourism meetings on 26 June. When will the House hear about them? In September, presumably. So, there is not even the fundamental accountability that there ought to be.

Take the Food Safety Promotion Board. It does not employ a single person in Northern Ireland. It is based in Cork and Dublin exclusively, and not a single job is provided. Under these accounts, we have contributed almost £25 million to its upkeep. We are supposed to sit back and sanguinely say, "Isn't it doing a great job?", when, in fact, it is doing nothing for anyone in employment terms on this side of the border.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Allister for giving way. I am listening carefully to what he has to say. He is raising issues around how we hold North/South bodies better to account and how we review their efficiency and ensure that they deliver better value for money. Those are the issues that are the terms of reference of the St Andrews review. I appeal to Mr Allister that his political objective may well be best achieved by supporting the St Andrews review and challenging "North/Southery" to be more efficient, more accountable and more open, not by letting the DUP away in the smoke and ignoring it.

Mr Allister: My problem with the St Andrews review is that it anticipates an increase, not a decrease, in the functions and numbers of the North/South bodies. That is the premise of the St Andrews review, and, therefore, I am certainly not looking for an increase in functions or numbers of bodies that, as sacred cows, have been a bottomless pit for Northern Ireland taxpayers' money with no return of practical consequence for anyone. The SDLP needs to address the issue the next time that it tells us about its conscience on care homes, schools or the need for public expenditure. It needs to

remember why it is the most avid supporter in the House of pouring £33 million a year into the black hole that is the North/South bodies. It has to put practical politics above its political ideology. That is what my amendment seeks to do.

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

Mr Allister: It seeks to say that, in these times, yes, there should be practical co-operation but not at any price and certainly not at the price of the elaborate arrangements that we have and the £33 million a year that they cost us.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá Sinn Féin ag tabhairt tacaíochta don rún. We support the motion, and we are opposed to the two amendments.

First, the results of North/South working, whether they are practical, formal or institutional, are obvious. We live on a small island of five million people, and it makes sense for us to plan our schools, hospitals, agriculture and agrifood industry together. I welcome the North/South Ministerial Council and the resources spent on North/South co-operation because I believe that we get added value. I was a member of the North/South Ministerial Council and was at many of the meetings that dealt with a wide variety of issues from education to language to waterways. Anyone who has attended a presentation by Waterways Ireland understands the economic benefits of developing our waterways and working together to do so. We have heard the same old diatribe from people, from one Member in particular. Let them explain to the towns and villages why waterways are not supported.

Look at the work that is done in education for some of our most vulnerable children, including special needs children. That is very good North/South work. It looks at best practice, North and South, learning from each other. Some of the best work that I did and best meetings that I attended involved watching professionals from the North and the South working together on special needs, developing best practice for Traveller children or developing Irish language materials for use in primary and post-primary schools, rather than the South developing some and the North developing others. The Members who regularly speak out against the Irish language would be the first to tell us that we are wasting resources through duplication. In this instance, we are now not duplicating and have very good materials.

Mr Clarke: It is a dead language.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Ms Ruane: Look at the INTERREG money. Newry and Mourne District Council and Louth County Council deserve huge mention here for developing one of the first memorandums of understanding in Europe. The reason that we are going to have a bridge at Narrow Water is "North/Southerly", as some people call it. That bridge will benefit everyone: people from the nationalist community and people from the unionist community. People in Kilkeel support it as much as those in Warrenpoint, Omeath or Carlingford. Therefore, I welcome projects such as the Narrow Water bridge and all tourism infrastructure. We do not have enough of it, so let us see more. We need much more working together between North and South.

I welcome the work of DCAL on Foras na Gaeilge and Waterways Ireland. I welcome the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association. We had a full house in the Senate, in the Houses of the Oireachtas in Leinster House. We have a North/South gateway initiative that benefits Donegal and everyone in Derry, not just one community.

In agriculture, we have an all-Ireland animal health strategy. Diseases do not stop at artificial borders. We maintained fortress Ireland to try to keep out brucellosis and to look at the issues of foot-and-mouth disease and ash dieback. The agrifood sector was referred to by Stephen Moutray, and I agree with him: it is the fastest growing sector at a time of economic recession on this island.

What we must do is get rid of red tape and bureaucracy when we are exporting or moving goods from Dundalk to Newry. Right now, if you want to work on one side of the border and live on the other, the red tape is nonsensical. If you are a teacher and want to move North or South, moving your pension is very difficult. We need to remove all those obstacles.

I agree that practical co-operation is good, but where I disagree with the DUP is that I believe that co-operation needs to be institutionalised. It needs to happen on the formal basis on which it is happening.

Health is showing the way. Let us give credit where credit is due. Specialist operations for children must be provided for. Who would deny a child with congenital heart disease the right to life? Specialist practice should be promoted on an island of five million people. Who says that someone in Derry should have to drive all the

way to Dublin when that person can get dialysis north of the border or vice versa?

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

Ms Ruane: I support North/South institutions. Yesterday, with other Members, I was proud to be part of the Assembly team in the Mourne mountains with the Oireachtas team.

6.00 pm

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the issue. The good relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as building on the already strong links between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, are fundamental in continuing the peace process here. In that regard, it is good to have this debate today.

I am happy to reaffirm commitment to the ambition and the values of the Belfast Agreement, and I wish everyone would do so. We brought a motion to the House doing just that in the aftermath of the flag protests. However, we must all realise that the Belfast Agreement was a transitional one. Institutions must change, adapt and grow. For example, Ulster Unionists have called for an official opposition to be created in the House. That was not part of the Belfast Agreement, but it is something that must and will happen in time.

I return to the wording of the motion. It is true that there are improved working relationships between Stormont and the Dáil, and that is to be welcomed. However, that is mainly down to the important changes in the Belfast Agreement, specifically the removal of articles 2 and 3 and the principle of consent. The Republic of Ireland no longer has an aggressive claim over the territory of Northern Ireland written into its constitution, and the principle of consent means that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland is settled well into the future. That has created the conditions for this new and improved relationship far more than the establishment of any body.

I also note the change in the DUP's position from opposing the institutions to actual implementation of them. In its 2003 manifesto, the DUP stated:

"Uncontrollable all-Ireland bodies are the starting point for a united Ireland",

Yet it now works together with Sinn Féin to enact the North/South parliamentary forum,

which met for the first time in October 2012. It really has very little moral authority on any of these issues.

It must be said that the Narrow Water bridge project does not have much to do with the debate. It was, of course, taken forward by the Finance Minister, who provided the necessary funding in the region of £2.6 million. Of course, we support any economic benefit flowing from this, but I suspect that its mention in the motion is part of the ongoing fight between Sinn Féin and the SDLP over who should be credited with securing the project. We will leave that for them to sort out.

I agree with the SDLP that the St Andrews review should be published as soon as possible. Value for money must be demonstrated by the cross-border bodies. They should not exist simply to create an illusion of links to one place or another. We should have more confidence in our identity than that. We should all support the urgent completion of the St Andrews review, as that may bring more clarity to these questions. How much value do the North/South bodies actually add? Are improved relationships really down to them? What have they achieved? Are they financially viable?

As I have stated, further progress and co-operation is not necessarily brought about through cross-border bodies. Therefore, if the review shows inefficiencies or a lack of delivery or shows that any particular body is redundant, that body should be modified or scrapped. That is the approach that we should take to quangos across government, as we are vastly overgoverned as it is. Just think about it: three MEPs, 18 MPs, 108 MLAs, 582 councillors, scores of commissioners, quangos and arm's-length bodies and, on top of all that, we have our North/South and east-west bodies. They must all be capable of demonstrating value.

As for the amendments, I note that the DUP is trying to remove all mention of the Belfast Agreement. However, the truth is that the DUP continues to operate that agreement every day, albeit with the meagre changes that, we are told, were secured at St Andrews. Let us look at those for a moment: no solo runs for Ministers — that has not stopped O'Dowd in education; protection of academic selection — O'Dowd is in the process of dismantling the Dickson Plan; a new way of governing parades — we still have an impasse in parading and the unacceptable Parades Commission in operation; Sinn Féin signing up to the rule of law, police and courts — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kinahan: — with Policing Board member Gerry Kelly —

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

Mr Kinahan: — obstructing the police in the course of their duties in north Belfast. Utter failure from the DUP. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Kinahan: We stand against the motion and the amendments.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion, which is timely and relevant, and I thank Mr McDevitt and his colleagues for bringing it to the House today. I also acknowledge the DUP and TUV for their amendments and will deal with those first. We will not support Mr Allister's amendment. His ongoing hostility to anything that mentions North/South is well known. I take his point about the figures that he gave us. Expenditure of £33 million and a 31% contribution towards a pension scheme seem excessive. The arrangements may or may not represent value for money, but they remain an essential component of an overall deal, which, in my opinion, benefited unionists and nationalists, and there is no way that they are going to be set aside.

The DUP amendment has more to recommend it, but it removes the important reaffirmation contained in the first line of the motion and the call for urgent completion of the review of the St Andrews Agreement. Therefore, we prefer the unamended motion and will not support the DUP on this occasion.

On an island the size of Ireland, the argument for intelligent co-operation across both jurisdictions has been well made; it should be beneficial to all of us. Others have mentioned the health service, and the Health Minister recognises the benefit, as hospital facilities, such as Daisy Hill, Altnagelvin, Enniskillen, and, I am sure, some on the other side of the border, attract custom from both jurisdictions. Likewise, in the area of children's paediatric services, which Ms Ruane mentioned, there is a recognition that an all-Ireland solution is the obvious and safest outcome, hopefully, involving some services being retained at the Royal Victoria Hospital, but we will have to see. It is intelligent co-operation.

I could mention many other examples of an all-Ireland approach: the single electricity market; the mutual recognition of penalty points; marine management; inland waterways; co-operation on illegal dumping; co-operation between the PSNI and an Garda Síochána; the education corridor along the border; Middletown autism project; and transport links. You could go on and on. I wonder how many of those things would have happened in the absence of agreement between the two countries. We will never really know.

The motion highlights the Narrow Water bridge, which is another necessary and economically justifiable decision that will benefit two beautiful areas — south Down and the Cooley peninsula — which complement each other so obviously. For the record, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment spent £6.5 million improving the tourism infrastructure in south Down recently. So, why anybody would oppose a bridge to get people to that area is quite beyond me, and I am glad that the Finance Minister has now endorsed it. He took his time over it but he got there in the end.

Politically, the Good Friday Agreement and the St Andrews Agreement are still evolving. They are in transition, as Mr Kinahan said, just like our own institutions, just like this place that we are sitting in. Progress is slow, but it is sure, and we can look at events that might not have happened if the agreements had not been established. Those include the repeal of the Government of Ireland Act and recognition of Northern Ireland's constitutional position; the pardon for Irish Free State soldiers who fought for Britain in the world wars; attendance at Remembrance Day events by senior Irish politicians; the apology for Bloody Sunday — you will see that I am trying to be even-handed here, Mr Speaker — and the monumental achievement of the Queen's visit to Dublin, which others have mentioned. It is amazing how a few words spoken in Irish can soften the hurt of a century of hostility.

I do not believe that any of these things could have been brought about without practical co-operation, given the deep wounds that existed. We needed an international agreement, and we still need it. The Good Friday Agreement remains the bedrock of our achievements and our hope for the future. I hope that the House will acknowledge the benefits that have flowed from those agreements, look to the future, as Mr Campbell said before he left, have a think about this and try to move on. I support the Good Friday Agreement. I support the motion, and I ask the House to do the same.

Mr G Robinson: I will speak to amendment No 1. It has to be stated that there are economic benefits to Northern Ireland from cross-border co-operation. The North/South and British-Irish Councils can bring benefit to the Northern Ireland economy by encouraging that co-operation. Having said that, we must all remember that we in Northern Ireland are part of the United Kingdom, which is where we derive a lot of our economic benefits from. Whatever bodies are in place, they must be of benefit to Northern Ireland, be seen to be accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly and be value for money. No additional bodies should be created for political reasons, as creating bodies can sometimes be a hindrance rather than a help to good relations, as well as being a burden on an overstretched public purse.

There is a good working relationship between the Assembly and the Government of the South, and that is to be welcomed, as Northern Ireland benefits from that day-to-day co-operation. Due to that bilateral approach, and the benefits to Northern Ireland, unnecessary change is not required. I encourage further use of the existing bodies in the belief that they are more than adequate in continuing the excellent work that has been done for the benefit of Northern Ireland and all its people. I support amendment No 1.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. I rise to support the motion and to speak in favour of the concept of North/South co-operation. Basically, as someone who represents a constituency that is right on the border, I see in such areas as Strabane and Lifford, many impediments to, but certainly a lot of benefits of, cross-border co-operation. We see some of the impediments, such as the difficulties in the likes of recognition of teaching qualifications, for example. My colleague Pat Doherty raised the matter in Leinster House recently when he said that the A levels in the North of Ireland are not properly recognised by institutions in the South, which means that only 1% of students from the North head South.

There are other issues, such as international postage costs for posting mail just a few miles down the road, roaming charges and other such matters.

However, we have seen a great deal of benefit from cross-border activity. In deprivation hotspots, such as Strabane, for example, there is a great deal of trade, which has helped keep the economy, which is in a poor state, going.

As we are on the outer edge of Europe, it is important to have a proper strategic infrastructure network in line with the TEN-T commitments. We have seen that most recently with DRD imploring the Irish Government to retain the N16 as a strategic route, so that we may benefit from future TEN-T funding. Indeed, we can see the implications that the A5, which is often spoken about in the Chamber, no earlier than today, in fact, has for the N14 and the N15, which take us to the most westerly parts of the country and, indeed, the EU.

An area in health that has been mentioned is the importance of an all-Ireland solution for services, such as children's heart surgery. We have also seen it with the radiotherapy unit in Altnagelvin in Derry, where, as part of the business case, it is essential that you have input from patients from Donegal and parts of the north-west to keep the service alive.

The message that should be going out from here today is that North/South co-operation makes sense and threatens no one. I speak in favour of the motion.

Mrs Hale: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the amendment, which my party colleagues tabled. I unreservedly believe that any North/South bodies or bilateral contacts must provide real tangible benefits for the people of Northern Ireland. Any future developments or further co-operation must be on that principle. The DUP is not in the game of creating further strands of needless bureaucracy at a time when decision-making needs to be efficient and effective.

One of the greatest challenges to the development of further North/South dimensions lies in the remit of the Irish Government in convincing their citizens of the strategic importance in the future. Having better co-operation, increasing trade and sharing some of the key services can be achieved without the need of further expansion to the North/South bodies. With both Governments faced with the question of tougher financial constraints, and forced to find budgetary savings, I question whether it is beneficial to the people of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland, to further fund North/South developments in the current economic climate.

Ministers can, and do, talk on a regular basis, and they raise issues on where duplicated services on border issues can be better organised to promote greater efficiency savings — all of that, without the need to expand the current arrangements.

The development of the specialist cancer unit at Altnagelvin is one of the ways in which that process is underpinned, and it illustrates how cross-border relationships can benefit the people of Northern Ireland, while ensuring that finances are being used efficiently.

I hold reservations about developing some joint services, and I echo the earlier statement of the Finance Minister: one must be careful to ensure that we, the UK taxpayer, are not providing services without receiving payment. To do so, would mean that cross-border services were becoming a net cost to the UK taxpayer.

6.15 pm

A number of weeks ago, the Assembly welcomed the economic package that had been agreed between the Prime Minister, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. In that context, all effort in the Chamber must be directed at finding jobs and creating stronger trading links in the UK and Europe while ensuring that people can afford to sustain themselves and their families. Although North/South co-operation is important, one must ensure that our focus is directed at not only short-term but long-term economic prosperity for all people in Northern Ireland.

The DUP has consistently argued against any increase in bureaucracy, be it North/South or even internally in Northern Ireland. We will simply not allow the SDLP's political agenda to dictate what it believes to be in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland at a time when government cuts are being made. Indeed, we have seen evidence of that in the House today. Any form of further bureaucracy and draining of stretched public finances is not welcomed or supported on this side of the House.

I welcome and support the DUP amendment.

Mr Maskey: I support the motion and oppose both amendments. In the first instance, I oppose the amendment from Jim Allister because he is absolutely opposed to all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement and, indeed, subsequent agreements and, for that reason, will take every opportunity to speak against the potential and real benefits that flow from those agreements. I have to say that the DUP amendment simply falls very short of what is either desirable or, in fact, the reality. Virtually all matters in the House are politically sensitive. In that amendment, there is almost an element of, "You say potayto, I say potahto." When

somebody talks about practical co-operation, I am fine with that. However, we also have to understand that we have institutional arrangements. Those arrangements are important and beneficial. For Sinn Féin, the lesson has been that the more co-operation there actually is — whether it be practical, as it might be described, or institutional through the North/South Ministerial Council — the better because all of it is beneficial and helpful. We argue that when you tot up the money and the potential — there is still a lot of work to be done on that — and quantify the benefits of all areas of co-operation, it is, clearly, a net absolute benefit to all citizens; not only those whom we represent directly, but people right across the island.

Earlier, my colleagues Cairíona Ruane and Declan McAleer itemised areas of co-operation and joint activity that happens between the Governments. Other Members have identified a range of initiatives that have been beneficial. I have to say that that has come from all parties. Everybody who has spoken so far has identified an area or areas of co-operation, if you call it that, or other manifestations of working together that have been beneficial. That is a good thing. As a party, we are encouraged by contributions this afternoon, with the exception, perhaps, of Danny Kinahan's, which is regrettable. That having been said, what we are getting more and more from the Ulster Unionist Party seems to be that every contribution that it makes in the House is negative. I suppose that it has become the biggest "No" party in the Assembly. Danny's contribution failed to recognise one very simple thing: at the time of the Good Friday Agreement, his party's then leader, David Trimble, almost single-handedly — and we challenged Bertie Ahern, the then Taoiseach — agreed the detail of the North/South bodies that flowed from the Good Friday Agreement. The Ulster Unionist Party had a significant role in that. Now, the Member is just dismissing the contribution that his then party leader made. Then again, that is the daily diet — I might say diatribe — that we get from the Ulster Unionist Party in the House; negative against everything and supportive of nothing.

As I said, my party welcomes the contributions that we have heard from all the other Members because, even if they support one amendment or the other, they have all identified areas of co-operation that have been beneficial to people whom we represent. Anybody under God who can then go on to say that we should not have that, or that we should minimise it or pretend that it does not happen, is foolish. What we want is to get to the point where we do not only

say that the institutions are there. I do not care what people call an institution; they can call it whatever they wish. We have had the "Belfast Agreement" and the "Good Friday Agreement". The fact is that we are working it and working through all those institutions. More are still to be delivered, and hopefully we can do that in time. It was agreed and endorsed by people right across this island at the time, after an awful lot of hard work and sacrifice by people in communities who wanted people, parties and Governments to come together and make agreements that will last, will benefit people and will take us away from the instability, violence, conflict and repression of the past to a place where we co-operate with each other.

The Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent arrangements provide for all parties in the Chamber to work together and share power. As I stand here, I know in my heart that if we did not have the institutional arrangements, we would not have power sharing. So, let us work with what we have — the institutions and agreements. Whether we like them or not, or whether we like bits of them or not, they are there, and they are institutionalised. Other party Members and representatives identified areas of co-operation that people have pragmatically adopted because they know in their heart of hearts, with the evidence to underpin their arguments, that those arrangements are beneficial to the people we all collectively represent. What we need to do —

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

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. What we need to do now is make sure that we work to maximise the benefit of all these institutions and use them as tools to make life better for all the people whom we represent.

Dr McDonnell: I am glad to support the motion and oppose both amendments. I oppose the amendments because, quite simply, they seek to undermine, weaken, reduce and minimise the importance of North/South co-operation in the context of the Good Friday Agreement, which is its true and proper context.

The amendments are strong in their praise of practical co-operation, which is welcome, but after all that, what sensible person would oppose co-operation that is undoubtedly beneficial to all our people? Not so long ago, many opponents of the Good Friday Agreement did just that. They condemned cross-border co-

operation in all its forms, however harmless or beneficial, on the narrowest of political grounds. We have moved on a little, but not too far. The public have moved on much further.

Ordinary people are conducting their own forms of cross-border co-operation every single day of the week, and anyone trying to erect new barriers on the island would be laughed out of office. Yet even now, when the benefits of co-operation are manifold, when world leaders come here to commend and encourage co-operation and when we are being held up as an example of progress to the world, there are still those who contrive to sound as mean-spirited as possible about the whole concept.

They — the opponents of the Good Friday Agreement — still seek to limit co-operation on political grounds or, at the extreme end, even to try to abolish it. Above all, they seek to deny and diminish the fact that North/South co-operation is an expression of the will of the people on this island, North and South. They seek to separate the positive, practical outworkings of co-operation from its grounding in the 1998 agreement. They seek to hide the political reality that has the backing of the largest mandate that ever existed on this island, but no one can claim to have any mandate to diminish it.

Our motion locates the working relationship between our devolved institutions and the Irish Government firmly and clearly within the ambitions, values and institutions borne out of the Belfast Agreement. Here is the bit that one-time and ongoing opponents of the agreement have trouble facing up to: we all in the House — each and every one of us, supporters and opponents of the agreement alike — exist because of that agreement, and we all draw our salaries on the basis of that agreement.

Mr Clarke: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Dr McDonnell: Some in the House may have fought elections based on questioning, opposing or seeking to limit the outworkings of the agreement, such as North/South co-operation, but that changes nothing. It is still the founding document of these devolved institutions that we enjoy. It sets the shape and contours of our representation of the electorate, who have already signed up in unprecedented numbers for a programme of power sharing and partnership.

Mr Givan: Will the Member give way?

Dr McDonnell: Sorry; no. I have a lot to get through. Thank you.

Fifteen years on, there are still those who remain in denial about the nature and significance of that agreement. There are still some who peddle the fiction that it was in some way superseded at St Andrews, when, in reality, the St Andrews Agreement was a mere footnote that threw a few concessions here and there in one or two directions. It did not limit the ambition of the original agreement for co-operation, but we believe that the time has come to begin to realise the full ambition of the Good Friday Agreement. The time has come for the two Governments to complete urgently the review of the St Andrews Agreement so that we can widen and deepen co-operation and reap its full potential for economic and social benefit. We have been waiting for over six years for that review, and whether the delay is borne of political hostility or political doubt, political certainty must now be forthcoming at the North/South Ministerial Council.

We will continue to push for that political certainty. We will continue to welcome progress where it is made, and we will never cease to challenge in the interest of building peace and prosperity on this island. I therefore appeal to Members on all sides of the House to approach co-operation from the viewpoint of mutual benefit and appraise all proposals on their merits, except perhaps at the most basic of tribal levels.

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

Dr McDonnell: There is in fact little or no politics in the concept any more.

I will leave it at that, Mr Speaker.

Mr McCallister: I voted yes in 1998 and have never changed my mind about the Good Friday Agreement. I supported it and continue to support it, and I will not apologise for bits of it to get cheap applause. I am not suggesting that anyone else do that, because I think that if you sign up to and believe in something at the time, you should stick to that, and I have had no reason to be proven wrong. When I look across the Chamber, I see the many, as Dr McDonnell rightly said, who derive their salaries from being here. They do so because of the institutions set up by the Good Friday Agreement. They may not like that, but they derive their salaries from it. I notice that Mr Givan is pointing across the Chamber. He may want to remember the old

saying, "When you point a finger one way, there are three pointing back at you."

Several points came up in today's debate. The one part that stands out for me is that, despite the debate on the motion and the amendments, we have all agreed that we want sensible, practical North/South arrangements that deliver for all the citizens whom we represent — indeed, for all citizens across the island of Ireland, whether North or South — and can make a difference to their life. There was one very practical example of this, when we all urged Minister Poots that if it made sense to do children's cardiac surgery in Dublin and it was a practical, sensible way of moving forward while retaining as much of the service in Belfast as possible, that was to the good of everyone. It did not harm anyone, and it worked towards a sensible outcome for all the people whom we seek to serve. That is the kind of sensible, practical outworking that we want.

The SDLP motion refers to a review. We should not fear a review of the agreement. I say to colleagues in the SDLP that they must also accept that a review might mean that we scrap certain bodies or change the way in which they operate, if that means that they evolve and move to a more practical level. We should not look at the agreement as though it was set in tablets of stone. It was always meant to evolve and move on.

Mr Kinahan mentioned opposition. Certainly, when I was a member of the Ulster Unionist Party, very few people advocated opposition more strongly than I did, within the party and outside it. I want these institutions to evolve, a subject that we will debate tomorrow. I want the North/South element of the agreement to evolve and look at practical and sensible ways of working.

Mr Allister gave us some very stark figures about the cost. All Members will be aware that some of the reports back from North/South meetings have been very light on details of what has been achieved. There are always things that we should do and that we want to look at to keep pressure on, North and South.

6.30 pm

I served for a number of years on the Health Committee. It is difficult to pursue people across the border for crimes or, indeed, to monitor sex offenders in a different jurisdiction. Those are practical things that we need to look at. Those are practical benefits that, wherever you live, safeguard our children and vulnerable

adults, and they are things that we have to do. That is why I have the confidence to support the SDLP motion and to oppose the amendments. I think that it is right that we review this, look at the practical outworkings and try to deliver what is best for the people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: The most interesting part of the debate is that it turns out that those who are caught in a time warp are the biggest advocates of the Belfast Agreement. Their blind, unquestioning loyalty to the Belfast Agreement means that they cannot even embrace issues such as efficiency and sensible change. They are so wedded to those institutions that they have no concern that they are costing us £33 million a year and no concern that some of the meetings are farcical and that they have to spin out a report to make it sound like anything. They also have no concern that money is being wasted hand over fist when the very same level of co-operation could be attained down the telephone, by a conference call or by a face-to-face meeting without the apparatus and all that goes with the Belfast Agreement. It is unfortunate that the time-warping of some is such that they just cannot — will not — look at any of that.

Someone said that the arrangements are part of a balanced settlement. Let me remind the House that we were told that it was imperative that there were North/South arrangements. We were also told that there would be east-west arrangements of equal validity. How has it turned out? Since the restoration of devolution in 2007, there have been 152 North/South meetings in sectoral, institutional or plenary format under the North/South Ministerial Council. What of the British-Irish Council? There have been but 28 meetings in its various formats in those same six years. Yet, we are told that it is supposed to be a balanced arrangement. For every one of the British-Irish Council meetings, there have been more than five North/South meetings. What about the cost? The most recent figures show that the British-Irish arrangements cost £170,000 a year, to which we contribute £15,000. That is £15,000 as opposed to £33 million.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: We are told that this is all part of some sort of equitable settlement, but it is quite clear that the politicising that is afoot is driving the "North/Southery". The mere window dressing of the British east-west co-operation is exactly that: window dressing. I will give way to the Member.

Mr A Maginness: The Member talked about east-west relations. I think that those are a good example of how positive relationships between Ireland and Britain have come about. Could the Member imagine that happening without the Good Friday Agreement?

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

Mr Allister: The Member contradicts himself. The good improvements in east-west relations have come with none of that apparatus. There are no institutional bodies that parallel the North/South bodies. If it can be done, and, according to the Member, it has been done on an east-west basis without that apparatus at a price of £15,000 a year, why on earth does it take all the apparatus and grandeur of the North/South bodies, and £33 million to boot, to get a response in that direction? The Member answers his own question.

It is time that the House looked seriously at the squander on the North/South bodies. The House should recognise that they can longer continue to be that sacred cow. They must be addressed, and there must be a cull in that expenditure. That cull is something that the taxpayers require, because there is no return to match it. It is a one-way process of squander, and it is time that the House faced up to that.

Finally, I do not draw my salary because of the Belfast Agreement. I draw my salary courtesy of the electorate, who sent me here. That is how I draw my salary. I am beholden to no one but the electorate, and I am certainly not beholden to the iniquitous, partial Belfast Agreement.

Mr Givan: It seems that — I agree with Mr Allister on this point — we are stuck in a time warp. The SDLP in particular is stuck in a time warp, and it brings to mind —

Mr A Maginness: What time warp is Mr Allister in?

Mr Allister: Two thousand and thirteen.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Givan: It brings to mind the line of the song:

"Let's do the time warp again".

Interestingly, that line is taken from the musical 'The Rocky Horror Show'. One could say that it is very apt that it is taken from that particular

musical when we look at the Belfast Agreement. Of course, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP were signatories to that agreement. They were the leading parties that negotiated it.

I understand that Members from the SDLP want to ensure that it is seen as the party that delivered that agreement so that they can sell that to their electorate. They are entitled to do so. However, the Belfast Agreement was not as it has been eulogised by them. It did not create some form of perfection. It had political instability. Need I remind the SDLP that, under its watch and that of the Ulster Unionist Party, this place was suspended on numerous occasions because they were unable to carry out the work that they had started. Previous leader of the SDLP Mark Durkan said that we needed to dismantle the "ugly scaffolding" of the Belfast Agreement. Scaffolding that the SDLP and the Ulster Unionist Party created. Perhaps SDLP Members want to go back to one of their previous leaders and tell him that he got it wrong. Conall McDevitt's navel-gazing has now resulted in his realising that Mark Durkan was wrong to say that it was "ugly scaffolding". He wants to protect the agreement, and he thinks that it was the right thing to do. Clearly it was not, and changes need to be made.

The Belfast Agreement that the Ulster Unionist Party also signed up to created the discrimination against Protestants who wanted to join the police force. It denigrated the contribution that was made by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Givan: The Ulster Unionist Party also signed the Belfast Agreement. As Members from that party spend their contributions trying to do a Pontius Pilate, washing their hands and being the hypocrites that they are, they need to remind themselves that they were also signatories to it. They are the ones who created the mess that those who followed from the Democratic Unionist Party had to clear up. It was through the St Andrews Agreement that we brought in accountability. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Givan: Therefore, whenever Mr Kinahan talked about uncontrollable North/South bodies, he was right. We made it very clear that the Belfast Agreement created uncontrollable bodies. It did, and the St Andrews Agreement changed that, and we brought accountability

back into it. That is why, in his contribution, Mr Allister did not mention that the North/South institutions are an embryonic all-Ireland. He did not mention that once, because we effectively neutered the agenda that the Belfast Agreement had created. That is why the Member for North Antrim did not mention that. However, he was right to say that we need to focus on the costs of the North/ South bodies.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Givan: We do need to make sure that they operate efficiently and effectively, but I think it is notable that Mr Allister indicated that he supports practical North/South arrangements, as does this party.

We support accountable North/South bodies, unlike the Ulster Unionist Party, which supported those North/South bodies that had no accountability to the Assembly. That is why now we only deal with statements that come to the Assembly two months after. I agree that they should have come much earlier, but if that is the extent of the criticism of what now happens within "North/Southery", I think that people can rest assured that this party has effectively dealt with the all-Ireland agenda that was contained in the Belfast Agreement.

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way to Mr Maginness; I need another minute.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he note that today a Minister from the Irish Government laid a wreath at the cenotaph in Belfast in commemoration of the Battle of the Somme? Is that not a positive aspect arising directly out of the Belfast Agreement? Could you have imagined that happening without the Belfast Agreement?

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

Mr Givan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome it. I do not think that the Belfast Agreement was necessarily the catalyst that made it happen, but I welcome it nevertheless. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to be heard.

Mr Givan: It is right that we develop relationships on a North/South basis to ensure that we have a peaceful and harmonious society. It might be useful if the leader of the

SDLP tried to build relationships with this party, rather than calling us bigots. That would be a good place for him to start trying to build a harmonious environment in this place. Nevertheless, this party does support practical co-operation. Our amendment deals with the British-Irish Council. Mr Allister, quite rightly, put Mr Maginness right in saying that we have had "good improvement in east-west relations" without the costs that you can attribute to the North/South bodies. Our amendment highlights that.

I think it would be useful to build the North/South relationships for the Republic of Ireland to rejoin the Commonwealth. That would be a good step for the Republic of Ireland to take to show that it is genuine and that it responds to how Her Majesty the Queen conducted herself in that way in the South. Let us build relationships with people in the Republic. I will be honest: there are issues in which I have a much closer allegiance to the Republic of Ireland than to the United Kingdom. I take the protection of the unborn child as the prime example. I have a much greater allegiance to people in the South when it comes to that particular issue.

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

Mr Givan: That is why Members in this place have sent a letter to the Taoiseach in respect of it.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Givan: Let us build good relationships where it is practical and where it benefits all our people.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Fáiltím roimh an deis cainte ar an rún thábhachtach seo. Thank you very much for the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on the motion. I think it was a useful debate and generally, apart from one or two exceptions, quite even-tempered. I welcome that.

For the motion, Conall McDevitt began by congratulating two DUP Ministers for the good work that they had done on North/South co-operation. He mentioned in particular the work of the Minister of Health, and gave the example of the cancer centre at Altnagelvin as a useful example of North/South co-operation. He also mentioned the words of Arlene Foster, the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister, in relation to celebrating the spin-offs of the G8

conference, particularly for North/South tourism. He said that those opportunities would not be there were it not for the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement.

He also agreed with Mr Campbell that the purpose of the motion was not to look back but to look forward. He said that the St Andrews Agreement allows for an objective review of the whole area of co-operation. He said that the St Andrews Agreement offered a challenge that had not yet been met. He made the point that it is not a question of making a political football out of co-operation but it is about deepening co-operation where it needs to be deepened and changing it where it needs to be changed. He said that we do this for the good of all our people. Mr McDevitt also said that we need to approach the review in a positive manner, with an eye to the future.

6.45 pm

Stephen Moutray accused me and Mr McDevitt of political grandstanding. You can see that I am very dismayed by that. Had he listened to Mr McDevitt's speech, however, he would have heard clearly that what Mr McDevitt said was far from the substance of that accusation. In fact, what Mr Moutray had to say about transport and infrastructure was positive and in keeping with the terms of the SDLP motion. He was arguing for expanded and developed co-operation, which we in the SDLP also welcome.

Mr Allister, on the other hand, challenged the usefulness of the North/South bodies against what he described as practical co-operation, but he failed to recognise the role of the North/South bodies in improving, encouraging and developing practical co-operation. He was eloquent in underlining the need for more work to be done by the North/South Ministerial Council, and I agree with him that it needs to do more work. That is certainly implied in our motion. I most sincerely thank Mr Allister for reinforcing that point for me and for my party.

Mr Allister also made the point that there needs to be more prompt reporting on North/South Ministerial Council meetings. I would not take issue with him on that. In fact, Conall McDevitt pointed out to him that the St Andrews review would allow for improvement in accountability and for many of the improvements that Mr Allister seems to seek.

Dr McDonnell said that the time had come for the two Governments to complete urgently the review of the St Andrews Agreement so that we can widen and deepen co-operation and reap its full potential for economic and social

development. He appealed to Members on all sides of the House to approach co-operation from the true viewpoint of mutual benefit and to appraise all proposals on their merits. He said that except for, perhaps, at the most basic of tribal levels, there is little or no politics in the concept anymore.

He would, I am sure, give the example of the Narrow Water bridge, which is mentioned in the motion. I sincerely hope that that will shortly arise as a symbol and, indeed, an icon of co-operation. When that project was first discussed, there were various strands of opposition, some of which, perhaps, were not thought through very well, and others were extremely local in nature.

However, when it became clear that the project could be completed in a short time frame, almost all the opposition melted away because of the sheer positive logic of the project. It is so simply, clearly and obviously beneficial to the immediate area and, indeed, to a large part of Northern Ireland that people were quickly converted, and that support was unquestionably cross-community as well as cross-border.

There were a few voices heard in opposition to anything cross-border on political or what we would call constitutional grounds, but they were like a dim echo from a distant and unpleasant past, which half our population does not remember and the other half would very much like to forget.

We heard from Caitríona Ruane and other contributors from Sinn Féin who supported the motion. They pointed out the good sense of co-operation across such a small island. Ms Ruane outlined the practical projects in education that had helped to prevent duplication of services, North and South, and she spoke about the need to remove obstacles to the free flow of workers across the jurisdictions.

I thought that Trevor Lunn made very good points. He pointed out that co-operation arising out of the Good Friday Agreement goes far beyond mere practical co-operation. He mentioned the apology for Bloody Sunday, the visit of the Queen to Dublin, the amnesty for Irish soldiers who fought for Britain and the attendance, as Mr Maginness pointed out, of Irish Ministers at remembrance ceremonies. Those examples go far beyond practical co-operation and are direct products of the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Kinahan mentioned the good relations that have arisen on a North/South basis and the

need to build on the peace process. He recognised that all the major parties in the Assembly now support the Good Friday Agreement, although his own party's support for it is somewhat in question. Some Members pointed out that his party was one of the main parties that negotiated the agreement. One is left wondering whether that party has done yet another U-turn. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member has the Floor.

Mr D Bradley: Mr Kinahan said that he would not be supporting the motion, which indicates that the Ulster Unionist Party has deserted the Good Friday Agreement, which I very much regret. It seems that the DUP is now the champion of the Good Friday Agreement and that the UUP has retreated from that position and is more eager to align itself with the type of attitudes expressed by Mr Allister. That is to be regretted.

What the SDLP and the other parties that support the motion have argued today has been rational, sensible and based not only on practical co-operation but on the other benefits that arise from North/South co-operation, some of which I mentioned. I urge all parties to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2 as that amendment will have been overtaken by the decision on amendment No 1.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 30; Noes 59.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robinson

NOES

Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dallat, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Gardiner, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr McGlone, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr A Maginness and Mr Rogers

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That amendment No 2 be made, put and negatived.

Main Question put.

Mr Speaker: I have been advised by the party Whips that, in accordance with Standing Order 27(1A)(b), there is an agreement that we dispense with the three minutes and move straight to the Division.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 52; Noes 37.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr A Maginness and Mr Rogers

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mr Craig, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robynson, Mr P Robynson, Mr Ross, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Clarke and Mr G Robynson

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly reaffirms its commitment to the ambition, values and institutions borne out of the Belfast Agreement; notes the improved working relationship between the Governments on this island including through the North/South Ministerial Council and British-Irish Council; welcomes the recent progress on the Narrow Water bridge project; and calls on the Executive, in conjunction with the British and Irish Governments, to complete urgently the review of the St Andrews Agreement to allow further progress on North/South co-operation in order to bring benefits to all of the people of this island.

Adjourned at 7.15 pm.



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