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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 17 June 2013

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Public Petition: Sculpture Celebrating the Shirt Factory Women of Derry/Londonderry

Mr Deputy Speaker: Ms Maeve McLaughlin has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22. The Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First of all, I welcome the opportunity to present this public petition on the Floor of the Assembly. The issue of the factory girls sculpture for Derry has been dragging on for the past seven years. The work was commissioned, a site was identified and an artist was appointed some years ago. However, work on the original site was halted because of issues outside the artist's control. An alternative site in Harbour Square in Derry was then identified, but, since then, the project has faced a series of obstacles and bureaucracy, resulting in the artist withdrawing her support and services from the project in a very public manner earlier this year.

Part of the artwork lies rusting in storage. This has been totally unacceptable not only to the artist but to the many tens of thousands of Derry women and, indeed, Derry men who worked in factories for many generations and were, in effect, the backbone of the Derry economy. Their role and their stories deserve to be remembered as part of the fabric of Derry's history. Taking seven years to erect a sculpture is not acceptable in anybody's book. It begs this question: did the will exist to do this?

I want to acknowledge those who, over the past number of months, have not let the issue die or have refused to let it go and have been to the fore of this campaign. They are able to join us today. I want to single out a number of people: Isabel Doherty; Clare Moore; Mary Doherty;

Margaritta Matthews; and Diana King, who, unfortunately, cannot be here today.

I urge the Minister for Social Development to listen to the people of the city, to unlock the blockages that exist, to allow the story of many, many thousands of Derry women to be heard and to allow this sculpture to be erected in order to ensure that it is a lasting legacy of the City of Culture 2013.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister for Social Development and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. According to the public media, last Friday, a significant economic pact that affects the House and the Executive of the House was apparently agreed. Yet again, we come to the House this week and it seems that there is no plan for any statement about that matter. When, if at all, will the contempt of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for this House be reigned in? Might we expect to have a statement made at some point so that the Members might be informed?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the House will understand that other events are taking place today that may be keeping the First Minister and deputy First Minister fully occupied. Of that, I have no doubt. However, I am sure that they will also be considering how they might inform the Assembly about recent developments.

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. My point of order is in respect of a recent interpretation and application of Standing Orders 17(4) and 17(5). The Assembly is governed not only by these Standing Orders but by the precedent set by rulings of the Speaker and yourselves. I refer you to a ruling made by the Speaker on 27 September 2011, where he set out arrangements for the speaking order, who can speak and when people are allowed to speak. Standing Orders call for a consultation between the Business Committee and the Speaker, and I wonder whether the appropriate consultation has taken place. I also wonder why such action should be taken when it affects only one party to its detriment. This goes against the principles of inclusivity in the House, and perhaps it might have been better to wait until the Committee on Procedures had reported before a decision was made.

Ms Ruane: Further to that point of order, I would like the House to know that my party was happy with the way it was working. We believe in inclusivity and are disappointed that it has changed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, I really need to deal with the first point of order first, and I should have done that.

Speaking arrangements are a matter for the Business Committee in consultation with the Speaker. I do not intend to allow the House to open up this issue or to engage in a debate about the Business Committee's decision.

What I will say is that the Committee on Procedures will be asked to consider issues relating to the emergence of new political parties or groupings during a mandate, including speaking arrangements. In the interim, the order in which Members may be called to speak has been revised. I will take no further points of order on the matter. If Members have queries, they should approach the Table. We will move on.

Mr B McCrea: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have made it perfectly clear that I do not intend to take any other points of order, and I ask the Member to resume his seat.

Executive Committee Business

Financial Provisions Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Financial Provisions Bill [NIA 22/11-15], which is a Bill to repeal the Development Loans (Agriculture and Fisheries) Act (Northern Ireland) 1968; to enable the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to pay grants to certain harbour authorities; to make provision in relation to the payment of interest on funds in court; to make provision enabling the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to recover certain costs; to make provision for the disclosure of data obtained by the Comptroller and Auditor General for data matching purposes; to enable the Department of Justice to make payments to certain bodies providing services for the police, etc.; and for purposes connected with those matters.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Assembly Business

Mr B McCrea: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is about the use of unparliamentary language in the Chamber. On 24 November 2009, the Speaker made a ruling about expecting:

"standards of courtesy, good temper and moderation." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 46, p81, col 1].

When discussing the Budget (No. 2) Bill, the Minister of Finance and Personnel, from a sedentary position, called me a fool twice. It is on the record. I wonder whether that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member was in the Chamber. He knows well that that was the time to raise the issue, not now.

Executive Committee Business

Public Service Pensions Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Public Service Pensions Bill [NIA 23/11-15], which is a Bill to make provision for public service pension schemes; and for connected purposes.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Mr Sammy Wilson, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill.

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the three schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 2) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill: First Stage

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to introduce the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Bill [NIA 24/11-15], which is a Bill to make provision for the regulation by district councils of the placing on public areas of furniture for use for the consumption of food or drink.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) 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 Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Bill.

The Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Bill was introduced at Westminster on 9 May 2013. The primary purpose of the Bill is to alter the regulatory system of remote gambling in Great Britain so that it is regulated on a point-of-consumption basis rather than point of supply, as is currently the case. The proposal to reform remote gambling legislation was announced by John Penrose MP, the then Minister for Tourism and Heritage, on 14 July 2011. It is intended that the legislation will come into force in December 2014.

Under the new system, operators who wish to transact with consumers in Great Britain will be required to obtain a licence from the Gambling Commission and will be subject to its regulations, technical standards and social responsibility requirements. That will mean, for example, that operators are required to assist in the fight against illegal activity and corruption in sports betting by informing the Gambling Commission of suspicious betting patterns.

Members will be aware that gambling is a devolved matter. However, the advertising of foreign gambling in Northern Ireland is regulated by section 331 of the Westminster Gambling Act 2005. As part of the current Bill, it is necessary to repeal this provision, which had the potential to leave Northern Ireland consumers exposed to unregulated remote gambling operators. For this reason, provisions will be included that require remote gambling operators to have a Gambling Commission licence to advertise to Northern Ireland consumers. As a result, consumers here can be assured that they will continue to have the same protection as consumers in Great Britain from the advertising of remote gambling.

In summary, I welcome the introduction of the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Bill at Westminster and that its provisions will be extended to Northern Ireland. I trust that Members will approve the legislative consent motion before the House, which will ensure that Northern Ireland consumers are protected from advertisements by unlicensed remote gambling operators.

12.15 pm

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

The Committee considered the idea of the Department here proceeding unilaterally but felt, after receiving advice from the Minister and guidance from the Department, that that would be unnecessary at this point.

The Committee had briefings from the Department on the wider issue of gambling legislation. Of course, we understand that gambling can be a contentious issue. Although the industry undoubtedly provides employment, there are potential risks. We know that individuals, unfortunately, can and do run up unmanageable debts that can have a wider impact on their family and friends. Therefore, the Committee has taken the view that we must strive to strike a balance between the protection of the consumer and facilitating the development of the gambling industry.

Although the Committee supports entirely the LCM before us today, we look forward to discussing with the Department further developments in wider gambling legislation.

Mr McCausland: I thank the Chair of the Social Development Committee for his comments on the legislative consent motion. I appreciate the time that the Committee took to consider the matter when dealing with a wide range of other important legislation.

I welcome the broad agreement for the proposal to extend this to Northern Ireland. Consumers here need to be protected from unregulated remote gambling operators, and the consent of the Assembly is required if they are to benefit from the protection that the Bill provides. I thank Members for their support and seek their approval for the legislative consent motion as tabled.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Bill.

Committee Business

Integrated Endometriosis Service

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

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate and expedite an inquiry into the urgent need for an integrated endometriosis service to address the severe suffering experienced by women with this condition across Northern Ireland.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I am delighted to move the motion. I hope that the Minister is on his way. If not, Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask that a copy of the Hansard report be given to him. This is a very important motion and a very important issue that the Committee has taken on. I accept that, given the day that is in it, people are probably caught up in other places.

Endometriosis is a condition that many people know very little about, and I assume that many in the Chamber know very little about it. It affects one in every 10 women between the ages of 25 and 45. The exact cause of the condition remains unclear, although the disease has been known of for decades.

Endometriosis behaves like cancer, although the abnormal tissue is non-malignant. It is caused by the growth of abnormal tissue in places outside the womb, typically the ovaries. It can spread within and outside the pelvis and can invade the bladder and the bowel. Women who suffer the condition have what they initially believe to be period pain. However, as the disease progresses, women can suffer chronic pelvic pain, pain on urinating and pain associated with bowel movement. It is a long-term condition, and at the minute there is no cure.

The disease not only causes extreme pain but, if untreated, can lead to reduced fertility and, indeed, infertility. There is also a strong link

with depression. Women with endometriosis often have to take long periods off work. They develop issues with their body image and relationship difficulties. That can all lead to low self-esteem and depression.

One of the problems that women with endometriosis face is getting a diagnosis in the first place. The symptoms can vary greatly and often mimic those of other conditions. Unfortunately, that means that, on average, women wait from seven and a half to nine years for a diagnosis. A recent survey showed that many women wait nearly two years before visiting their GP about their symptoms and that, on average, it is a further four years before they are referred to a specialist. The condition is progressive, so that, by the time that it has been diagnosed, about 5% to 10% of sufferers have the severe form of the disease. Action needs to be taken to raise awareness among women and GPs on the symptoms of the disease.

Although there is no cure for endometriosis, the symptoms can be managed with pain-relieving drugs, hormone therapies and surgery. Those treatments can help manage the pain, reduce the severity of symptoms and improve fertility and quality of life for a woman living with the condition. Guidelines from medical professionals recommend that women with the disease be managed in endometriosis centres by a dedicated multidisciplinary team. Regional endometriosis centres and networks are well established in England, and long-term data demonstrate that those centres improve treatment outcomes in a similar way to improvements in cancer treatment brought about by the introduction of regional cancer centres.

A single dedicated endometriosis clinic staffed by a consultant gynaecologist runs once a month in the Belfast Trust. However, that is not sufficient to treat the number of women with endometriosis. There is a need for a multidisciplinary team to be set up. That would improve waiting times for surgery, which currently can be anything up to 18 months. It would also allow a more holistic form of care to be provided to help women manage the condition; for example, therapies such as counselling and pain management have been shown to be effective. In my view, that sort of service should be provided in a new women and children's hospital. The Committee has recently learnt that the Department intends to proceed with plans to progress that as two separate projects: a new maternity hospital and a new children's hospital. That is far from ideal. We need a hospital dedicated to women's

needs that goes much wider than maternity issues.

A condition such as endometriosis can have a devastating impact on a woman's life — on our sisters, our daughters, our nieces and our friends. Effective and timely treatment needs to be prioritised so that women are not suffering in silence or without the proper support and help that they deserve.

A number of weeks ago, I and other Health Committee members had the honour of attending a breakfast meeting facilitated by Barry Turley. We listened to the stories of two women who suffer the condition. To me, as a young woman — well, I think I am a young woman — it was a condition that I knew very little about. There are a number of reasons why we tabled the motion for today. It is to raise awareness among women, families and communities that women who have the condition are suffering. Some of them are suffering severe pain. It is also to raise awareness among our GPs and medical professionals and among the Minister and his Department that it is a condition affecting a lot of women. We need to get our heads around the issue and ensure that services are put in place, look at what is happening and what is best practice in other countries and lift that so that we can move the issue forward here.

One of the women, in sharing her story with us, told us that she attends three different venues in a certain trust area. She has to tell her story three times, and she has to get three sets of notes prepared. She feels that every time she goes for an appointment to deal with the disease it is back to square one. I appeal to the Assembly to support the motion. I appeal to the Minister in his contribution to the debate to tell us exactly what he is going to do to move it forward. I appeal to all in the Assembly: when we talk about the new women and children's hospital, it is not about delivering babies; it is about something that is women-centred, women-focused and designed for women. The sooner we move to get that in place — we have been talking about it over 12 years — the sooner conditions and diseases such as endometriosis can be dealt with in a venue that is solely for women.

Ms P Bradley: I rise as a member of the Health Committee to support the motion. I agree with the Chair of the Committee on the importance of the motion. I hope that, through the motion, awareness will be spread across our country of the importance of women going to attend their doctor with any of these signs or symptoms.

Endometriosis is a condition that blights many women's lives in Northern Ireland. At present, as the Chair said, the average waiting time in Ireland and the UK from the onset of symptoms to diagnosis is nine years. That is nine years of suffering from severe pelvic pain. It can also include painful intercourse and unexplained bleeding. As the symptoms are often similar to so many other conditions, including certain cancers, the uncertainty of waiting to hear what is causing the symptoms can have a severe psychological effect, not only on the women but on their entire family. Often, by the time diagnosis is made, the disease is at the severe end of the scale and can affect other organs in the pelvis.

Severe endometriosis is more common than uterine and cervical cancer combined. The physical and social costs of the condition cannot be underestimated. It causes women to have absences from work and issues with self-image and mental health, and relationships can be impacted negatively. Women with the disease may experience infertility or problems conceiving, which in itself brings on a raft of problems for them and their family. Some 85% of women with the condition experience depression, with 30% of those being in the severe category. Many women also face issues of embarrassment about their condition that can delay them in seeking treatment or gaining understanding from their work colleagues or friends. We need to look for a solution that deals with all those issues and does not focus just on a medical approach to the problem.

It is recognised in the medical world that a gynaecological approach alone is not always successful in the treatment of the condition and in improving the quality of life for sufferers and their families. The best approach is a joined-up, multidisciplinary one. To that end, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists/British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy guidelines recommend that women with severe disease or those with intractable symptoms should be treated in endometriosis centres by a dedicated multidisciplinary team.

I am pleased that the Belfast service has been established, but such is the prevalence of the disease that the service is very much under-resourced and disjointed. This means that the service has had to run on an ad hoc basis, relying on considerable goodwill. We need to develop the service into a holistic, women-centred approach on a single site, where medical and surgical treatment can be offered alongside paramedical therapies.

12.30 pm

The condition is of significant cost to the economy, women and the wider community. We have the skills, we have seen that we have the goodwill, and we have the demand. What we need now is a master plan for how we will provide women with access to timely help to enable them to effectively manage their condition and get effective treatment early to stop it progressing to a more advanced stage. I support the motion.

Mr McDevitt: On behalf of the SDLP, I support the motion. It is worth noting that conventional gynaecological medical and surgical treatments are not always successful in achieving improvements in quality of life for patients with endometriosis and that the input of members of a dedicated multidisciplinary team is always necessary. Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists/British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy joint guidelines recommend that women with severe cases of the disease or intractable symptoms be managed in recognised endometriosis centres by a dedicated multidisciplinary team. Regional centres and networks are very well established and are, indeed, the practice in England. Long-term data demonstrates that endometriosis centres improve treatment outcomes, similar to how the outcomes of cancer treatment are improved by established regional cancer centres.

The Belfast service was established, headed by a gynaecologist with a special interest in the management of endometriosis. A colorectal surgeon, a urologist with a specialist interest, fertility specialists, a radiologist and members of the pain management team were also part of that centre. Demand for the service in Belfast has increased in recent years due to growing numbers of referrals from within and outside the trust area. The team has operated on an ad hoc basis, with a considerable degree of goodwill, within the confines of the job plans of the consultant staff involved. However, even though it is on a single site, it is a rather disjointed arrangement. As a result of the reorganisation of the service within the Belfast Trust, the service has fragmented even further.

The caseload undertaken in Belfast far exceeds that which is necessary to achieve recognition of the need for an endometriosis centre. Given that, it is disappointing that there is no sign of any planning for such a centre, even in the face of such demonstrable need. I think that there is consensus on the Health Committee that a single dedicated centre, staffed by a consultant gynaecologist, needs to be established and

that, as well as the consultant gynaecologist, there needs to be a pain management specialist, a psychologist, a colorectal surgeon, a urologist, and research and specialist nursing support. In my opinion, that is why it is important that the motion is before us today. Holistic, women-centred and women-focused care is essential to improve the symptoms associated with the condition. Medical and surgical therapies play a central role, but paramedical therapies such as counselling and pain management, including cognitive-based therapies and other alternative therapies should also be offered. Ideally, all those services would be located in a specialist centre.

Waiting times for surgery need to be shortened because the impact of the condition on quality of life and ability to function effectively in a social context is profound. Both my female colleagues who spoke before me spoke frankly and honestly about that. As a man, I feel unqualified to comment on the real impact of endometriosis because it is very difficult to understand just how debilitating such a condition must be.

Ms S Ramsey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: Yes, indeed.

Ms S Ramsey: I appreciate the Member saying that, and I know that he is not saying that this is just a woman's issue. It is women who suffer from endometriosis, but the condition has an impact on family life. I have listened to husbands and boyfriends who have spoken about the impact that it has had on their relationship because they cannot do anything to support their wife.

Mr McDevitt: I thank the Chair for that observation. I will close by picking up on that remark and make the point that effective clearance of disease results in significantly improved fertility post-operation. The broken family situation that could arise when a spouse contracts endometriosis can quickly and very positively be addressed if the woman in the relationship has access not just to the medical treatment but to the holistic treatment that is required in order that she can play a full role in family life, if she is part of a family, and can receive the support that is necessary from her spouse and her loved ones. I support the motion.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion. Endometriosis affects thousands of women in Northern Ireland and hundreds of thousands of women in the United Kingdom. In a recent

Assembly answer to a question from the Chair of the Committee, the Health Minister indicated that some 1,155 hospital admissions in Northern Ireland in 2011-12 were as a result of diagnosis of endometriosis.

The lack of awareness of the condition is of particular concern, and that is why I welcome this debate. As other Members said, the condition is indicated by a range of very common symptoms, such as heavy period pains, lower abdomen or back pain and fertility problems. There are other symptoms such as discomfort when urinating, bleeding from the rectum, bowel blockage and coughing up blood. Side effects include lack of energy, depression and fertility issues.

The very nature of the range of symptoms results in the involvement of a range of specialists in investigating the undiagnosed condition, including gynaecologists, urologists, gastroenterologists, fertility experts, endocrinologists, as well as specialists in pain management to help sufferers to get through the condition. Ultimately, the gold standard test, which most sufferers will undergo after a long route, is the laparoscopy under general anaesthetic.

Only 20% of the population know about the condition. In a 2006 briefing to the all-party parliamentary group of MPs, sufferers, especially younger women, indicated that only 50% of GPs had taken them seriously. Surprisingly, 33% of gynaecologists did not take women with the condition seriously in the early presentation; indeed, 45% of women with endometriosis had seen a physician five or more times before diagnosis. There is a long and torturous path to travel before the correct diagnosis occurs.

It is particularly concerning because, when the illness has been diagnosed, given the range of ailments that I described, people's worst fears are that it can result in a wide range of other conditions. Ultimately, if they are not receiving appropriate treatment, that can cause great concern for their well-being and mental health.

Often, in the early stages, about two thirds of cases were found to have been misdiagnosed, which resulted in ongoing suffering, poor use of National Health Service resources, frequent accident and emergency department attendances and difficulty in retaining employment. The cause or trigger of endometriosis is largely unknown. It is a long-term condition, which can become chronic.

Another area of concern amongst women with this condition is the patchy nature of the specialist pain clinics across the different health trusts in Northern Ireland. I am aware of concern within my area and that additional resources need to be given to the Northern Health and Social Care Trust's pain clinic, because pain management is often a key issue in trying to improve quality of life.

Treatment can comprise hormone therapy, surgery or even, in the most severe cases, hysterectomy. Surgery is often complicated by the range of specialists required and the lack of joined-up procedures involved. That may result in additional delays and multiple operations on the individual.

What can be done? Like other Members, I support investment to try to create an integrated endometriosis service in Northern Ireland, which will provide and improve the care that sufferers receive. Although the long-term vision is for a new women's hospital, such a building would be a number of years away even if it was commissioned today. So, it is essential that we move now to try to bring together the specialist team that others have talked about in order to provide that integrated service, have a better co-ordinated use of specialists and improve the lot of those involved.

In England, nurse-led clinics have been widely used to increase support for those with this condition. So, I too support the establishment of a regional endometriosis centre with a dedicated interdisciplinary team to improve diagnosis for those who suffer from this condition and to improve their lifestyles.

Mr McCarthy: I am pleased that we have the opportunity to debate this important subject. I thank Sue Ramsey, the Chair of the Health Committee, for bringing it to the attention of the Assembly.

As has been said, endometriosis is a common condition that can affect a wide range of women, particularly those who are in their reproductive years. Based on a demographic read-across in the UK, it could affect over 50,000 in Northern Ireland and maybe twice that number. Therefore, this must be an issue of concern to everyone.

Although the condition can be managed, we must acknowledge that it can have an impact on the lives of women, on their physical and mental health and on their work and lifestyle and that it can cause pain and discomfort and be totally stressful. There is no doubt that this condition has a significant economic cost.

Encouraging maximum participation in our economy and other aspects of our society among people of all backgrounds is essential. So, any additional costs involved in the provision of a more integrated service to address this condition should be seen in that context.

It is important to raise wider awareness of the condition and to ensure that sufficient information is widely available. That includes reassuring women that it is not an infection, is not contagious and is not cancer. We must also do more to encourage women to seek advice and treatment, if appropriate, at a very early stage. Surveys show that many women are suffering in silence for a very long time before diagnosis or are waiting too long before visiting their GP to seek a formal diagnosis. The condition can manifest itself in a range of ways. Things are complicated further because the symptoms are not exclusive to endometriosis, which makes direct diagnosis more difficult and means that a laparoscopy procedure is required. Even that is sometimes not definitive.

There also seems to be a need to promote greater awareness of symptoms and diagnosis among medical practitioners. It seems that only a small minority of women suffering from the condition have received a diagnosis, let alone treatment. We also have to recognise that the most effective treatments are the ones that are most individualised to address the specific needs of the woman in question.

12.45 pm

The debate should serve as a platform for the provision of a more integrated service and proactive approach to addressing the condition. That should involve better awareness and information; greater understanding of the consequences for individual women, the economy and wider society; encouraging women to seek treatment; better understanding of diagnosis; and wider availability of treatments. My party and I fully support the motion.

Ms Brown: As a member of the Health Committee, I support the motion. It has struck me, particularly since I became a member of the Committee, that there are so many people struggling daily with illnesses that most of us have only ever heard about in passing or, in some cases, not at all. Endometriosis is one such illness. I had a basic knowledge of what it involved, but I have since discovered the sheer

misery experienced by those who are inflicted by it.

I apologise if I repeat statistics that other Members have given, but it is a very important issue. Endometriosis is a condition that affects approximately two million people in the UK — that is one in every 10 women — and approximately 1,500 women in Northern Ireland. In 2011-12, just over 1,000 women were diagnosed with the disease. Endometriosis can affect a woman in numerous ways, but it normally presents itself through the experience of severe pain or problems in conceiving children. Diagnosis tends to be made in women aged between 25 and 45, a time that is normally associated with childbirth. Endometriosis does not necessarily inhibit fertility. In fact, symptoms do not usually appear or cause problems in pregnancy but, instead, reappear after childbirth.

Endometriosis can impact on a woman's life in a number of ways, including chronic pain, fatigue, lack of energy, depression, isolation, inability to conceive and difficulty in fulfilling work and social commitments. Aside from the symptoms of chronic pain or inability to conceive, the condition can impact on many other aspects of a sufferer's life, including her social and work life. As with any chronic, debilitating illness, it is hard enough for a sufferer to bear without her having to cope with the additional stresses of a negative impact on her home and work life.

For all the difficulties, there are some encouraging positives. Treatments are available and medical procedures are possible, which can help to alleviate the effects of the illness. The current procedure for women who present to their GP is for a referral to be made to a gynaecologist, who may not diagnose the condition immediately. In fact, on average, it takes around eight years for a diagnosis. Women suffer in silence for an average of two years before speaking to their GP about their condition. Although I accept the potential difficulties in diagnosis and the fact that it is a difficult condition to diagnose, that time delay is unacceptable. It is unacceptable for women to suffer in such pain for so long. Many sufferers state that painkillers are ineffective. It is also unacceptable for women of childbearing age who have the condition to have to wait for a diagnosis, by which time their chances of conceiving a child could be much more difficult.

Although there is no known cure for the condition, treatment is available from medication in the form of painkillers or hormone treatments to surgery. In fact, surgery has a

significantly high success rate, with symptoms recurring in just 10% of sufferers. It is imperative that the Department of Health look at the experiences of women suffering from endometriosis and how they can be helped through speeding up diagnosis and management of the condition. I would like the Department, as part of that programme of work, to encourage women who are experiencing pain and upset to consult their GP at the earliest opportunity. The sooner we get a diagnosis, the greater the hope that the impact can be lessened. I support the motion.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As a member of the Health Committee, I also support the motion. I have to say that I did not know very much about endometriosis. I have a sister-in-law who suffers from endometriosis, but although I had heard of the condition, I had no in-depth knowledge of it whatsoever. Other Members gave some detail in the form of statistics etc.

As the Chair mentioned earlier, other members of the Health Committee and I attended a breakfast facilitated by Barry Turley a few weeks back. It was attended by two specialists and some women who suffer from the condition. They gave us a very informative and graphic description of this horrific condition. Some of the slides were graphic but gave some insight into the suffering of women with the condition.

Endometriosis has been around for a long time. As was mentioned, it takes quite a long time to diagnose in many cases. It can affect younger women as well, and the age range of 25 to 45 was mentioned. The specialists who we talked to said that it can affect younger women quite badly. More recently, I spoke to a woman who suffers from endometriosis, and she has been told that some of her internal organs are so affected that she could suffer from a punctured lung, which could be fatal if not treated as an emergency. Although we have been told that the condition is not fatal, it needs long-term treatment, and operative treatment has been successful in a lot of cases. The two women who gave evidence at the breakfast meeting explained how it has affected their personal life and working life and said that their whole lifestyle had been affected. Some have had to change jobs, and they have to be very careful when lifting things and so on.

If endometriosis were a condition that affected men, it would have been treated and dealt with at a much earlier stage. One of the doctors said that, if it was, for instance, a testicular problem, there is no doubt that treatment would

be available, it would be taken seriously and GPs would have a much more in-depth knowledge of it. That needs to be addressed. There has to be a multidisciplinary approach and an integrated service. I ask the Minister to take all that into account in his response because it affects so many women in so many ways, and it is important that their voice is heard. One of the good things about the motion is that it has raised the profile and awareness of endometriosis, and, as a result, more people are aware that it is a long-term chronic condition that causes extreme pain and suffering to a number of women.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I strongly welcome the opportunity to hear the views of MLAs on the motion and respond to it. I thank the proposer for raising this important issue today. Doing so will help to raise the issue publicly and ensure that more people are aware of it.

I should explain at the outset that endometriosis is quite a common condition that affects around two million women across the UK, most of whom are diagnosed between the ages of 25 and 40. Therefore, it should be dealt with regularly, particularly in the primary care sector, and there should be a good understanding of the condition at that level given the numbers of women who demonstrate symptoms. The symptoms commonly vary from one patient to another, but they include abdominal pain, severe period pains, painful sex and infertility.

In most cases, the condition can be treated in the primary care setting. If a patient's GP suspects that she may be suffering from endometriosis, they will usually refer her to a gynaecologist. A couple of Members suggested that diagnosis can take up to nine years. If that is the case, it indicates that the problem is, in the main, with GPs not referring people quickly enough. I have the figures for gynaecology here: of 9,240 patients waiting for an appointment with a gynaecology specialist, 7,712 will be seen within nine weeks and only 25 will wait for more than 18 weeks; and 3,970 patients are waiting for inpatient admission.

Again, 2,657 will be seen within 13 weeks, while 456 will wait for over 21 weeks. That is not quite as good as the first figure, but it demonstrates that people should not be waiting for years to receive that service and that they do not wait for years, certainly if a general practitioner is recommending it. Therefore, if we are urging anything here, we are urging GPs to get the analysis done more quickly in identifying the condition and having the

presentation made to a gynaecologist at an earlier point.

At present, there is no known cure for endometriosis. However, the symptoms can often be managed with painkillers and/or hormone treatments. Surgery can sometimes be used to improve symptoms and fertility. Each patient is managed and treated on an individual basis according to her needs and in line with clinical judgement, and patients with fertility issues associated with endometriosis are seen in dedicated fertility clinics, where detailed workups can be performed prior to referral for IVF treatments. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has not at this point issued any guidance that is specific to the management of women with endometriosis, and there is no guidance in development. That is an issue that people who are lobbying may want to take a look at, because it would have a significant impact if NICE were to issue guidance on the issue.

I appreciate the desire of the proposer of the motion to ensure that the suffering experienced by women with the condition be addressed as comprehensively as possible. The Department would prefer to look further at the need for an integrated endometriosis service. Its view is that the needs of endometriosis sufferers are being addressed in primary and secondary care provision and that, therefore, we do not have the compelling case for the integrated service that is being proposed today that we would like to have at this point. However, it is important that we pay attention to the views of elected Members as well as the Health and Social Care Board. We ask the board to ensure that the services to provide for sufferers are given that appropriate priority to ensure that people are not waiting a long time for diagnosis and appropriate treatment in each individual case.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I thank everyone for taking part in the debate. One of the key issues is that this is the start of raising awareness, as some Members said. I also thank 'Talkback', which covered the story on Friday. It did so on Friday because it said that it would not get airtime today as someone was coming to town. 'Talkback' covered the issue quite extensively on Friday, and that started the raising of awareness of endometriosis, among not only women but everyone.

I have to say that I did not know anything about it. I had heard it talked about when I was growing up, but, when I looked into it and got the presentation, it frightened me to find out that

a lot of women suffer the condition. There, but for the grace of God, go I. Having listened to stories and read some of the detail around it, if I am honest, I thank God that I do not have it. I am committing to ensuring that people who do have it get a better service from the Health Department. I am looking at officials here. As Members have said, it is a debilitating disease. It impacts on people's daily lives. It impacts on women who dream of having a family, some of whom develop fertility problems. It impacts on depression. So, the Committee is committed to looking at it and it is something that we will come back to.

1.00 pm

Transforming Your Care talks about early intervention and prevention, and to me that is the issue. If some of our GPs — I do not say all of them; we have a lot of good GPs — need educated in this, then that is what we need to do. We need to ensure that when women attend their GP they are not fobbed off as having severe period pains or told, "You will be all right" or "It is a woman's issue". This issue affects everybody. It may be that only women suffer from it, but it affects everyone. Society has moved on from the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s. Women should not be fobbed off or told, "It's period pain. Don't talk about it".

Paula Bradley is absolutely right: today is the start of raising awareness. She pointed out that, whatever arguments there might be about statistics, 85% of women with the condition suffer depression. If I am honest, I must say that it does not shock me that a lot of women who suffer from the condition have depression. When you suffer from chronic pain on a daily basis and are constantly told that there is nothing wrong with you, it is no wonder that people have issues. Paula said that there was a need for a holistic, woman-centred approach on a single site.

What I liked about the motion is that my male colleagues on the Health Committee took part in the debate. Fair play: you have sent out a clear message that this is not just a woman's issue. Conall McDevitt is right that medical treatments on their own were not always successful. He said that there was a need for a multidisciplinary team and a single, dedicated centre so that women do not have to suffer and do not have to attend many sites and retell their story.

Roy Beggs said that he was genuinely concerned about the lack of awareness of the condition. I think, Roy, that there is no argument against that. The statistic that Roy

highlighted, whatever the Minister has said about some of the statistics, was that 45% of sufferers had visited their GP five times or more before being diagnosed. Consider how you would feel if you visited a GP once with a chronic condition and no one listened to you and you were told, "It's period pains". Imagine going twice, and again no one listens to you, and you are told, "It's period pains". Then imagine having to go five times or more before the illness is diagnosed. So, there is a need to bring in specialists to deliver that integrated service.

Kieran McCarthy said — I think that this thread ran through all the speeches — that it was important that GPs were made aware of the condition. This takes me back to Transforming Your Care. Unfortunately, over this past couple of weeks, "Transforming Your Care" seem to have become bad words. Whatever the issues around residential care — we will park those — if we are talking about services in the community, early intervention and prevention, GPs need to be a key component. If there is a lack of awareness among our GPs, we have failed right away. The Department and the Minister need to get started on awareness raising.

Pam Brown said that the delay in diagnosis was unacceptable. I could not argue against that, Pam; you are absolutely right. Mickey Brady said that, if this condition affected men, it would be treated better and more options would be made available to deal with it.

I welcome the Minister's input. I agree that GPs are key, and I think that all the Members who have spoken said that. Minister, the motion calls for an urgent inquiry into the provision of an integrated endometriosis service. I know that there are centres in England, so we need to learn lessons from what happens in different places. The Minister said that the Department would like to look at this further because there was an issue about the evidence: I agree. It might be useful to talk to those who are dealing with the condition. So if the Minister has some free time, maybe we can set that up. From working with you over the last year or so, I think that you listen. I might not always agree with you, but there might be an opportunity for you to listen and match the story with the statistics. As I said in my opening remarks, we are talking about our sisters, our mothers and our daughters, and there, but for the grace of God, go I. Minister, I would appreciate it if you took time out to listen to the women.

I remember quoting from a press statement about a year and a half ago during a debate in

the Chamber. That statement had been issued by the World Health Organization probably a year before that. It stated that women were still dying in the world because men were in charge. In responding to that debate, the Minister said — I paraphrase — that he hoped that he would change that. I talked to a male consultant about endometriosis — Mickey Brady touched on this — and he said that, if we were talking about testicles, more would be done. To get it right, we need to send out a clear message that we are listening, we are taking on board what is being said and we are going to prove the World Health Organization wrong: the fact that men are in charge does not mean that they are not listening to women's issues.

I thank everybody who took part in the debate. We have a duty to ensure that people in our constituencies are aware of the information that is out there. We also have a duty to ensure that the medical professionals in our constituencies are aware of the issues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate and expedite an inquiry into the urgent need for an integrated endometriosis service to address the severe suffering experienced by women with this condition across Northern Ireland.

Private Members' Business

Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill: First Stage

Mr McDevitt: I beg to introduce the Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill [NIA 25/11-15], which is a Bill to set a maximum speed limit on residential roads of 20 miles per hour.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Fishing: Aid Package

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

Mr Frew: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the efforts made by fishermen in meeting EU catch regulations in respect of cod and in reducing other unwanted catches; recognises the expense incurred in purchasing highly selective gears and forgoing valuable catches as a result of using these gears; sympathises with those fishermen whose earnings have been dramatically reduced because of a combination of bad weather and using new fishing gears; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to deliver urgently a meaningful package of aid designed to assist those fishermen who have helped her comply with the commitments she made at the EU Fisheries Council in December 2011.

I appreciate that business has moved forward much more quickly than most if not all of us anticipated, not least the Minister. I hope that she will be able to join us very soon. I know that she has been caught in traffic as, I am sure, have some Members who wanted to take part in the debate. It is a shame that the Minister will not be able to hear my contribution, because the same thing happened last week when she was sick. I hope that that is not going to be a habitual thing when the Chair of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development speaks.

This is a very important debate about the aid that the Assembly, the Department and the Minister should administer to a very important element of our industry and economy in Northern Ireland. The fishermen and trawlermen of our three main ports have invested in their industry and provided assistance to the Minister and the Department to move the industry forward to meet the needs of Europe. It is significant that the fishermen have been asking for meetings and assistance from the Minister. From this side of the House, it seems that the Minister has turned her face away from fisheries. Within days of the snow crisis, the Minister announced that she had seen fit to give an aid package to hill farmers who had lost stock. That was all well and good, and I supported that because I saw the need and the pain experienced by hill farmers in my constituency and my neighbouring constituency of East Antrim. It was good that we could support that industry while it was on its knees, but, equally, we should recognise the moves that the fishing industry has made in recent months and the pain and hurt that it has had to absorb not only because of the weather but because of things that it has had to put in place, such as highly selective fishing gear, to assist us through European negotiations. Those things have hindered the catch that our fishermen can take. The fishermen were quite prepared for that, even though they have taken a hit. Some of the fishermen and trawlermen have changed selective gear seven times, costing them thousands of pounds. There seems to be no recognition of that or of the pain that the fishermen have gone through from the Department or the Minister.

Last week, we discussed the issue in an Adjournment debate, and I think that that was the first time that the Minister acknowledged that the industry was going through a very bad time. Last week, comments were made that the industry was sick. This industry is not sick. That is scandalous language. This industry, if supported, could do great things in the future. The report 'Going for Growth' states that it could have targets to grow turnover by 34% to £90 million, grow value added by 45% to £22 million, grow external sales by £36 million to £75 million and grow employment by 9%, which is 600 full-time equivalents. So, this industry is not sick. Let me stress again that this industry is not dying. This industry is not a twilight industry that will soon disappear from our shores. This industry is the future of agrifoods. This industry is the future for Northern Ireland's economy. With support, it could do great things for Northern Ireland, and we could export this food, as we already do, all around the world. It is very high in protein and is something that we

as a country should be selling as our produce. It is good that we have an industry that could move forward and expand, but, like every industry, it needs support. At the minute, the Minister is turning her face away from fisheries.

The Minister said last week and, when she arrives, will say again that the Department supports fisheries very well. She will name a number of things, but she will avoid answering this question: what is the difference between the hill farmers of north Antrim, east Antrim, the Sperrins and south Down and the fishermen and trawlermen of our three ports? Let us look at the comparisons. They both went through horrific weather.

People talk about the snow crisis. It was the wind that brought the snow; it was the wind that drove the snow to the hedgerows in which all our stock was lost. That was the same wind that left our fleet in our harbours and the same wind that, in the months passed, has hampered, delayed and disabled our fleet from fishing the way it should in what are the harvest months for our fishing industry.

1.15 pm

Our fishing fleet makes its money from mid-April to mid-September. During the winter months, they sail only to provide a wage for their workers; if they did not, they would not be able to keep those people on board all year round. So, it is very important that they fish when they can in the summer. We have already lost percentages of that. Some 20% of the profit-making period is already lost, and we have seen the fleet's earnings drop by 50%, compared with 12 months ago. That is another comparison with the farming industry.

The Minister will say that it is because the hill farmers lost stock. Well let me tell the Minister this: the trawlermen have also lost stock, because of the highly selective gear that they have had to implement. In some cases, they have had to implement seven. Not only have they lost thousands of pounds in implementing the highly selective gear, but they have lost stock and catch because of it. They have not just lost cod, which is the reason why they had to implement the highly selective gear; there has been a loss to their prawn harvest. They have lost yield; they have lost crop; and it has cost them in the pocket.

I ask the Minister not to turn her face away from fisheries. Please, listen to what they are saying today through their representatives. I represent north Antrim. There are not many fishermen in

north Antrim, but, as Chair of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, I realise how much the industry means to Northern Ireland. This is agrifood. We should all realise that food has a social element. Europe looks very carefully at food production, food safety and food security, and so should we. It is good to invest in the agrifood industry and to assist it financially, and fishing is a major part of that. I have no doubt that these people need assistance. It is not a sick industry; it just needs to be supported. It could grow to do great things and to import and export all round the globe, and Northern Ireland will glean the benefits. So, I say this to the Minister: please, do not turn your face away from fisheries; help these people to make Northern Ireland a better place by improving its economy and this industry.

There is no doubt that the fishing industry needs that help at this time. It has helped the Minister and the Department. It has implemented highly selective fishing gear that has hurt its crop. That is the comparison to the hill farmers of east Antrim and north Antrim who have lost stock. These fishermen have also lost stock, through highly selective gear, not only in cod but in their harvest of prawns.

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

Mr Frew: I say this to the Minister: please, listen to the House today and implement assistance to the fishing industry.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I start off by saying that I agree, as I did on Tuesday night, with much of what the Member who has just spoken said, although we can differ on the analysis of the context at the end.

I welcome today's debate on the fishing industry, on the back of last week's Adjournment debate. I hope that we can work in tandem again, and keep working in tandem, to improve the fortunes of one of our most important agricultural sectors. It is a valuable asset within our agricultural sector. We must recognise that our fishing industry endures some of the toughest working conditions of any sector out there, and I am glad that we get the chance, again, today, to reiterate that. As well as that, it contributes tens of millions of pounds to our local economy. We should, therefore, put on record our thanks to the fleet's fishermen for doing that and enduring those conditions.

As was outlined by the previous speaker, the Chair of the Agriculture Committee, and by most of those who spoke on Tuesday last, the past few months have represented real challenges for the local fishing fleet. Those challenges have, without any doubt, placed huge pressures on families in Kilkeel, Portavogie, Ardglass and further afield. As other Members will undoubtedly illustrate in the debate, the reasons for that are very varied. Crucially, the changing dynamics of the common fisheries policy have created certain pressures that the industry has been forced to tackle in recent times and, as the Chair outlined, specifically around the entire episode of selective gear.

That is, perhaps, where I have a step change in the analysis. I agree that the industry is not sick and that last week's comments were unhelpful. However, as the Chair outlined, fishermen need support. I feel that they are getting support. Is that support, in the round, absolutely perfect and what is needed? Perhaps it is not. However, that is exactly what we are here to discuss: how it can be improved. I hope that we can keep doing that and bring forward ideas. I agree with the Chair that the comments about a sick industry were not helpful. I spoke to fishermen on the ground at the weekend. That comment was pulled up as being unhelpful, and they did not like to hear it.

Fishermen have to recognise the support that has been put in place. I welcome the Minister's recent announcement that she will establish a research and development fund that is designed specifically to meet the challenges of selective gear. That significant investment will help in the months ahead. The ideas about upskilling and training are very important and beneficial. The Minister also outlined that, subject to the completion of a business case, she will meet the full cost of replacing the local fleet's satellite monitoring system. That may come as a prerequisite from Europe. However, if that money were not put in by the Department, local fishermen would have to pay for it out of their own pockets. Therefore, it is support.

If we take all those measures in the round, the fishing fleet here will benefit from financial support in the region of £1 million. The final figure might be anything between £0.5 million and £1 million. Again, that is meaningful support. Is there more to do? There possibly could be more to do. Perhaps I will finish on the following point.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. He outlined the Minister's support to the fishing

industry at this time. However, he should recognise — I hope that he does — the thousands of pounds that fishermen themselves have spent on selective gear for fishing vessels and fleets. Thousands of pounds have been spent to implement that. Fishermen have also lost thousands of pounds from their catch. The Member also mentioned the vessel satellite monitoring system. Again, that tool is designed to help the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). It does not in any way help fishing in a practical sense. Therefore, it could be argued that the support is wafer-thin.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be brief.

Mr Hazzard: In other parts of Europe, fishermen might have to pay for that satellite system themselves. They will not have to pay here. Therefore, it will not be the burden that it might have been. However, I take the Member's point about what needs to be done. I ask the Minister to take a look at European Fisheries Fund (EFF) opportunities and how they are maximised for the local fleet. Fishermen will tell you that there are opportunities. However, it is a mixture of their not knowing how to maximise those opportunities and the fact that the EFF machinery process strangles the entire process so that the local fishing fleet cannot maximise those opportunities quickly or efficiently.

Many people acknowledge the opportunities to modernise their fleets, but I call on the Minister to look at the EFF machinery process to see whether something can be done to get vital funds and information to make the process a lot more attainable to the local fishing fleet. I think that that will make a big difference, and we should look at it. I ask the Minister to look at that and, if possible, to do something.

As I outlined at the start of my comments, the industry is not sick. It simply needs to be supported in the right way and at the right time. I think that it is being supported. We might be able to do one or two things here to support it going forward. It needs to be future-proofed because, as I said, it is one of our most important agriculture sectors.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the debate. Our fishing organisations have been requesting financial aid from the Minister for the past four months. In last week's debate about the Portavogie fishing fleet, the Minister acknowledged that the industry was going through challenging times.

The issue of selective fishing gears has already been touched on. Since December 2011, the fishing industry has co-operated in looking at these, and the process has resulted in trawlermen having to make seven gear modifications. As the Member opposite said, thousands and thousands of pounds have been spent on that. In addition, as a result of adopting those modifications, each vessel has lost a proportion of its catch — not just cod, which was the intention of the modifications, but the target species of nephrops. The value of the losses can only be guessed.

We welcome the further financial assistance that will be provided to the industry to review and improve the skills of our fishermen, but the worry, particularly after this past year, is whether there will be many fishermen to upskill.

The current vessel satellite monitoring system has been touched on. A sum of £250,000 has gone into that, but, frankly, it is of no practical help to fishermen. In addition, a short time ago, e-logs were introduced to replace fishermen's paper logbooks, and it now costs them £250 to update their software licence. That is just another levy for fishermen, in addition to the light dues and the Isle of Man licensing charges, which deliver no practical benefits to fishermen and are regarded as another tax.

The Minister pointed out that all fishermen in the UK region will soon be subject to the payment of light dues, but she has not told us — this is known out there — that fishermen in the South will not have to pay. So, again, Minister, why are our fishermen — a bit like our farmers — not doing as well from Europe as our Southern counterparts?

The Minister acknowledged the drop of up to 22% in landings, but, in monetary terms, that is a drop of up to 40%. In 2009, her predecessor, Michelle Gildernew, delivered an aid package to local fishermen. However, the earnings of the local fleet are now down by maybe 12% when compared with those from 2009.

The fleet is now halfway through one of the three most productive months of the fishing calendar. We want prospects to improve, but they have not. Fishermen are resilient and hard-working, but enough is enough. The demise of the fishing industry has had devastating consequences for towns such as Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. If fishermen cannot land product, our fish processing industry will be here only in the short term. Despite being innovative, our fish processors have a limited supply, and to maintain their markets, they have to buy from elsewhere. If

boats do not go out, there is less work for the service industry, with the result that businesses in towns such as Kilkeel close week on week.

The Member opposite talked about fishing being an integral part of our agrifood industry. If we really want to capitalise on that, fishing has to have its rightful place. My colleague Minister Attwood recently raised the concerns of the fishing industry at the Executive table.

Finally, fishermen are not sick — they do not want to rely on government handouts. They are hard-working, responsible people, but they need strong support from the Executive.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important and timely debate. Commercial fishing, as part of the wider agrifood sector, is an important contributor to the Northern Ireland economy. Indeed, it is a crucial industry for our many coastal communities, providing jobs offshore and onshore, not forgetting the processing jobs and various support services associated with the industry.

In 2011, the total value of fish landed in Ardglass, Kilkeel and Portavogie was some £24.2 million, and, in 2010, processing had a turnover of £67.3 million.

With often damaging consequences, the fishing industry is very much dictated to by rules emanating from the EU. Those rules have major implications for our fishermen, their fleets and their families.

1.30 pm

The commitment given at the December 2011 Fisheries Council to reduce cod mortality, which stems from the cod recovery plan, has imposed obligations on our fleet to reduce cod by-catch. With the Swedish grid being found to be inappropriate for our fleet, fishermen here have spent considerable time, money and effort working to develop highly selective gear to reduce by-catch. That work has meant that significant losses of catch have been experienced, which is recognised in the motion before us.

From speaking to fishermen, I know that the loss of catch has been found to range from anywhere between 10% and 90%, depending on the particular conditions of the day at sea. The willingness of fishermen to engage in work to find a workable and practical solution to the problem must be recognised and commended by us all. However, that willingness must be

met by adequate recognition and support from DARD. Support is key to helping ensure that the sector can play its part in delivering further economic and social benefits to our coastal communities and the wider economy.

I do not need to remind Members or the Minister that it is only a few weeks since the publication of the Going for Growth action plan. It has outlined for us how all sectors of agriculture, fisheries and food processing have a part to play in driving our economy forward, but that cannot happen without input from DARD and the industry. The ongoing efforts of the industry to perfect appropriate gear shows that is willing to play its part and is capable of doing so. It is all the more important that the Minister must not be found wanting.

I will now speak about the cod recovery plan. Relentlessly reducing fishing effort has hit the industry hard, and I note that MEPs approved two reports in Strasbourg last week that are aimed at rebalancing the policy, which has been found not to have been meeting its main objectives by the EU's Scientific, Technical and Economic Committee for Fisheries (STECF). More widely, the common fisheries policy (CFP) is undergoing reform. The centralised Brussels micromanagement of the CFP has damaged the industry, with decisions taken that pay little attention to practical realities.

From speaking to fishermen, it is clear to me that their daily working lives have been hampered by years of rules from Brussels and that the industry would be better served operating outside the CFP. The reformed CFP will simultaneously present the industry with opportunities and challenges, not least the drive to tackle fish discards. That will present our fleet with many problems because of the practical outworking of the policy, which will require extra sorting boxes, ice and space on board boats. Like our farmers, fishermen need maximum support from DARD. Figures show that nephrops landings from areas 6 and 7 during April and May dropped by over 43% and 36% from last year, and that pattern is likely to continue later in the year.

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

Mrs Dobson: Ongoing support is vital if we are to ensure that the industry rises to future challenges.

Mr McCarthy: I support the very important motion before us, which comes on the back of the Adjournment debate last Tuesday evening.

Our fishing industry has been in decline for many years, and despite the efforts of our fishing Minister and the Department, fishermen feel let down. Our local fishing communities, both out at sea and in the processing units on land, have never endured such a lengthy struggle to survive. I hope that the Minister will redouble her efforts to ensure that that decline is halted, and halted immediately.

I remember when Portavogie in my constituency was a thriving fishing village where there was lots of work, both on the boats at sea and in the many processing plants there. There was always activity going on in the village. People were happy. There were plenty of shops in the village, and there was money to be spent. The money was spent in not only Portavogie but neighbouring villages, particularly Kircubbin. I must express an interest: my wife ran a drapery shop in Kircubbin for over 40 years. Many of her customers were from Portavogie, which we really appreciated. Even now, years after my wife retired, those same customers have kept up their friendship. They speak of the hardships and changed times that we are living in compared with the years gone past. Unfortunately, shops in Portavogie are now very few and far between, as are the processing units in the village. The same applies to other fishing villages in Northern Ireland.

The motion calls on our fisheries Minister to deliver a meaningful aid package to assist our fishermen to carry on with the job that they love doing. I hope that the Minister can do something to deliver some form of aid for the fishing fleet. I have to pay tribute to our fishermen, who, probably all the time, put their lives at risk while at sea. Sometimes, unfortunately, lives have been lost in pursuit of doing the job they love doing.

As we said last week, the costs confronting our fishing fleet today are horrendous. There is the cost of gear, oil and labour, and that is not to mention the weather. Following last week's Adjournment topic, the Minister announced support measures for the fishing sector, which are very welcome. However, unfortunately, they do not go far enough. Our local fishermen really feel let down and that the odds are stacked against them. They feel that other outside fishing fleets — and I said this last week — are permitted to fish in the waters that they are not permitted in. In fact, those waters are outlawed to the local fishermen. They are being asked to spend money on gear, etc, while it appears that others get away with it. One is not really sure whether that is correct or

perception, but that is the perception of our local fishermen, and they feel aggrieved.

On behalf of our fishing fleet, I implore the Minister, who is with us today — I hope that her cough is better from last week and she is able to deliver more good measures. With her health improving, you never know; there might be something — to listen to the plea of the fishermen and make every effort to revive a once thriving and proud industry.

Miss M McIlveen: I support the motion. I thank my party colleagues for bringing it to the House. Last week, I brought an Adjournment topic on the challenges facing the Portavogie fishermen, which touched on the same issues. As is the way in such debates, the Minister was able to respond, but there was no opportunity to challenge that response. I am pleased that this opportunity has come along so quickly.

Since then, I have again met a large number of fishermen from the Portavogie fleet. The situation is no better. I will respond to some of what the Minister said during the Adjournment debate. She said that the Portavogie fishermen are frustrated. That is an understatement; they are utterly distraught. They are stunned by the freakish conditions that they have faced over the past few months. Regardless of what the Minister says, they feel abandoned by her and her Department.

The Minister recognised that the farming and fishing sectors have been affected by bad weather but stated that farmers experienced physical and fodder losses, which is different from what fishermen are facing. Like other colleagues, I see no real difference. The physical stock on which the industry relies has been badly affected by the weather. The fishermen had to continue to pay their crews and fees during that time with no income coming in. The impact on the fishermen has been seen over the course of eight months. There are tangible reasons why a hardship payment is as appropriate for fishermen as it is for farmers.

The Minister accepted that a 22% fall in landings is significant, but insisted that, although the quota and days at sea still remain for 2013, there is still time to make up that ground. In Portavogie, 50% of the boats were tied up from Wednesday of last week because their owners simply could not afford to leave the harbour. I spoke to one man who fished five 24-hour days only to generate just over £500 from his catch after he had paid for his fuel. From that, he needed to pay himself, his three men, the mortgage on his trawler and insurance

of £200. Some boats cannot leave the harbour because their owners cannot afford fuel; they have exhausted their credit, even with their co-operative fuel company.

Why has that happened? It is because thousands of pounds were spent trialling gear for the Minister's Department and valuable catch was lost during those trials. Fuel costs have increased; crews still have to be paid during a bad winter; fishing has been poor due to a bad winter and lower than normal sea temperatures; and there is still a low return on the fish that are being caught. How can they catch fish when they cannot afford to leave the harbour?

During the Adjournment debate last week, the Minister referred a number of times to moneys that will be available over the next two years for highly selective devices and satellite monitoring devices. She said that should not be:

"dismissed and thrown to the side." — [Official Report, Vol 86, No 2, p95, col 2].

I do not dismiss or throw to the side any investment in our fishing fleet. However, satellite monitoring devices are enforcement mechanisms; they are not aids for fishing. There are more immediate concerns to be addressed, and the Minister seems to be refusing to do that. While the prawn quota increased by 6%, the price has dropped by 11.5%. Of course, other costs have increased, such as fuel, insurance, e-log licences and Isle of Man fishery licences, to name but a few. The average value of a catch has dropped by 40% since last year.

The Minister said that I should not just listen to the catching sector but should be mindful of the processing sector. I have listened to both, and if the boats cannot go out and fish, the processors will have nothing to process.

The fleet can be sustainable for many years. Under normal circumstances, the fish are available, and we have heard good news this week on improved cod stocks that will be able to be fished in several years. However, these are not normal circumstances and we are not several years down the road. I urge the Minister to place proposals with the Finance Minister for consideration.

During last week's Adjournment debate, the Minister advised that she would not consider:

"a pure hardship package" — [Official Report, Vol 86, No 2, p99, col 1].

I believe that she must offer other practical help that can and should be given. In 2009, her predecessor delivered an aid package, yet, compared to that year, earnings are down by 12%. Money is needed to allow the fishermen to function, and assistance could be given to enable fishermen to borrow more from the banks or to give banks the confidence to lend additional moneys. Perhaps the Minister would consider leading a task force to the banks.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to reiterate all that I said during my 15-minute speech last week. However, the Minister can review the Hansard report. I suggest that the Minister demonstrates leadership —

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

Miss M McIlveen: — to show that she cares about the fishing industry and will provide the necessary aid.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Before I carry on, I hope that the Chairman of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is assured by the presence of the Minister in the Chamber and that that worry has gone out of his head.

Fishing is one of our most important industries, with an estimated value to the economy of £24 million. If we take in what is landed in the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, that figure goes up to something like £56 million. We heard earlier that the processing industry is going down, but we are processing £60 million worth a year, so something must be getting caught.

The Agri-Food Strategy Board's 'Going for Growth' plan, which was published in April this year, described the fishing industry as:

"proven to be robust and resilient in the face of challenge."

That plan and the industry's resilience will be challenged now and in the future. Like many of our other major industries, the fishing industry has suffered from global recession, bank inflation and spiralling fuel costs. We could consider that across the board. Members mentioned the farming industry and we could talk about the cost of fuel for that industry. Likewise, the road haulage industry is paying higher fuel costs. The most recent problem was the weather.

The reality is that we have no say in any of those costs; they are landed on us and we have to pay them. Our industry has to pay them, and, quite a lot of the time, it cannot pass the costs on, although sometimes it does. It is just a never-ending wheel. The banks are putting the squeeze on our businesspeople. All of us here know that there is no wriggle room for businesses with banks.

1.45 pm

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I will be brief. I clap the Member for getting one on me earlier.

The Member can blame the banks, the wind, the fuel costs and everything else, but the Minister and the Department are there to support the industry. What is the difference between now and 2009? Things are a lot worse now, and the Minister should respond, like her predecessor did in 2009, and deliver a substantial aid package.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am sure that the Minister will respond and respond very well.

There is just no room now at all with the banks etc. As we know, the number of bankruptcies is rising all the time in all businesses across the board, no matter what they are. We talked about farming. We know that costs for farming are coming up. We got over the winter, and this incoming year will tell a big tale about farming.

It is known that our fleet is ageing, which makes the boats more expensive to run. Given the cost of fuel, it is not cost-effective to run some of the fleet. We accept that, and the industry accepts that.

We have asked what the Minister has done to date. In December 2012, the Fisheries Council secured a 6% increase in the quota for prawns, which is one of our most important stocks. New ice-making facilities in Ardglass were invested in. By the time that it closes in December 2015, the EFF programme for fishing waters will have indirectly put in €36 million. To date, that funding has reached £1.75 million and, with DARD funds, has been committed directly to projects. Harbour facilities have been allocated £3.35 million, and science projects have received nearly £1 million.

The selective fishing gear project is led by the Sea Fish Industry Authority and a steering group that includes two representatives from our own producers' organisation, local net-

makers, AFBI scientists and DARD officials. Funding for the satellite programme, which has been talked about, is not something for the fishing industry. Unfortunately, it is Europe-led. Europe has stated that it is needed, so we have to use it.

I hope that today we can all agree that we have to get together and make sure that we can get the best deal for our fishing industry, as we have done with the farming industry. It is one of our lead industries, and we cannot afford to let it go.

Mr Byrne: I, too, welcome and support the motion. I also sympathise with the fishing communities of Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel. The difficulty is that we have some people who say that there is a problem and others who feel that there is less of a problem. That is a conflicting message to be going out from the Assembly.

There is no doubt that the fishermen are up against it. They have had a poor season due to bad weather, the higher cost of diesel and poor catches in the last year. The big issues for many years have been quotas, days at sea and the total allowable catch restrictions, which have been a particular problem for the cod and the white fish industry in general. Prawn fishing has been largely successful, particularly for Kilkeel. Fortunately, last year, we got a 6% increase in the quota for Irish Sea prawns being landed at Northern Ireland ports. But the question is this: why did Scotland get a 25% increase in its quota, when we got only 6%?

A proper fishing plan is needed. We need some forward planning strategy for the fishing industry. In the agrifood strategy report, 'Going for Growth', reference is made to the fishing industry and some target figures are set, but there is no implementation plan. Therefore, I would say that DARD needs to have a fishing unit that is relevant and up to speed on the needs of the fishing industry and can develop a partnership approach with fishing vessel owners.

Selective gear has been raised as a key problem here. The fishermen feel very sore that they have been forced to change the gear about seven times. That has not meant that their plight has improved; in fact, they would claim that their capabilities in relation to having a successful fishing business have been hampered. The European common fisheries policy has long been a major problem and issue of concern to our fishermen here. We have a very small fishing industry working at three ports, but they are also under restrictions vis-à-

vis their fishing in Irish Sea waters, against the restrictions at the Isle of Man, the Scottish ports and what can be landed at the English ports. I contend that, unless we get key officials in the Department who are willing to work strategically with the private sector interests in the fishing industry and with Brussels, we will still, basically, stumble along.

Stumbling along is no longer any good. People who own boats owe a lot of money on those boats. They have big monthly repayments and employees to pay. The bills are increasing, and bank credit facilities are fewer. Let us take a very successful business like Rooney Fish. Mr John Rooney wants to expand the business. He can grow a market overseas for his oysters, but there are big restrictions. Planning needs to allow him to have a larger fish processing industry. He wants to be able to grow oysters inshore. Those are the sorts of things that the strategy would need to examine to make sure that that industry can grow, because there is a market internationally for those oysters. That is the way forward. We have to have better forward planning, a better strategic approach and a better proactive approach by DARD in particular.

I hope that the Minister can outline some support for the fishermen, but it is strategically important that there is a clear positive signal looking to the way forward.

Mr Nesbitt: As ever in a debate on the fishing fleet, I want to pay tribute and give thanks to my colleague Councillor Angus Carson of Ards Borough Council, who for many years was a captain in the fishing fleet in Portavogie. He is still a resident of the fishing village and has family members who are still involved in fishing and fish processing, so he gives me a direct insight into the difficulties, hardship and frustrations currently felt in and around Portavogie and our other fishing villages.

Today, I have in on work experience a delightful young woman by the name of Georgina from the REAL (Rights, Empowerment, Action and Lobbying) Network, which is a body that lobbies on disability issues. We were touring the Building, and she was remarking on what a wonderful, comfortable and enjoyable place this must be to work. I do not know how difficult the 108 Members of the Assembly believe their job is or what trials, tribulations and dangers they experience daily, but I think that, if you compare our life with that of a member of the fishing fleet, you will find that we get it relatively easy. So, it is important that we focus on the good work that they do.

Later today in Enniskillen, at the Lough Erne resort, eight of the most powerful leaders in the world will sit down to dinner. We have, quite rightly, made much of the importance of food and of showcasing local produce to the world during the G8 summit, so agrifood is important. One hundred years ago, when our economy was really humming, it was based on a few select industrial sectors — shipbuilding, light engineering, linen and rope works — but agriculture was our number one. It remains our number one today, and for the foreseeable future agrifood will be our number one sector. Surely, on that basis alone, we should not be found stinting in the support we offer.

Frankly, the fishing fleet has been struggling of late. Mother Nature has not been on its side. Indeed, as we saw in March, Mother Nature has not been on the side of farmers, who were equally disadvantaged. The support offered to farmers and the support offered to the fishing fleet were not equal. As early as late March, I called on the Executive for support for our fishing fleet. It was a call not for special treatment but for equal treatment. Support and funding are there, which is part of the frustration. The European Fisheries Fund is there, but is it being maxed out? Are we spending it all? Is it all being spent by the Minister in a timely manner? On behalf of the fishing fleet, I respectfully ask the Minister to address that issue, particularly the sort of support that comes out of Great Britain, which seems to be annual support for the fishing fleet for issues such as light dues, as against the one-off support that appears to come from the Northern Ireland Executive.

What is missing, I suggest, and what would be so welcome to the fishing fleet, to the families of the fishermen and to villages such as Portavogie, can be summed up in one short, simple word: hope. We need hope that the Minister will afford assistance that is equal and equitable to fishermen; hope that the EFF will be maxed out in a timely manner for the benefit of the fishing fleet; hope that the endless divisive scientific debate and argument over cod and different fish stocks in various fishing areas can finally be resolved in a manner that the fishing fleet can look on as equitable and honest; hope that succession planning can be brought through in a manner that promotes a sustainable fleet for the future; and hope, indeed, that there will be a future for the fleet. Earlier today, the Minister welcomed the president of the United States to the Waterfront Hall in Belfast. I listened to his speech and was struck by one three-word sentence: "Hope is infectious". Is it too much to ask that, today, in

this debate, the Minister infects the fishing fleet with hope?

Mr McCallister: Like my colleagues, I support the motion.

Probably the biggest challenge for the fishing industry is getting the recognition from DARD that it needs and deserves. We hear great talk about agrifood, but, when I speak to fishermen in Kilkeel or Ardglass in my constituency or in places such as Portavogie in the neighbouring constituency of Strangford, there is always a feeling that their needs and wishes are at the bottom of a very long list. In fact, they probably wonder whether they are even on the agenda. It is encouraging that, after not having had a debate on fishing for a long time, two have come along at once, like buses. We need to keep the fishing industry on the agenda and keep talking about the challenges that it faces.

I pay tribute to the Minister for at least working with the sector to develop some of the gear, although the fishermen did not sign up to it; I think that the Minister signed up on their behalf. The Minister has shown some flexibility in working with the industry, and we need that type of work to continue rather than a rigid, straitjacketed approach. I am more critical of the Minister about the slowness to react to a real crisis in the industry. Quite rightly, after the snow in late March, there was a quick response from the Minister and the Executive and a collective response from the Assembly, which is what I expect and want to be encouraged when people are really up against it. Fishing is up against it. The fishing and processing industry is a huge employer, especially in South Down and Strangford, and they make a huge contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. We cannot and should not ignore them. We should try to stimulate the industry and encourage it to continue to improve.

2.00 pm

Certain things are not in the Minister's gift. She has no control over the weather, the banks, labour markets and the cost of labour, the price of fuel or market returns, but she can look at producing the aid package for which the industry has been calling for a number of months. She has the ability to act as her predecessor did a number of years ago and initiate that support. That is where the Minister has a responsibility and a duty to act, not months or maybe years down the line but immediately. She must speak to the industry to find out what the real needs are. She must find out how we can put together a package that

she can present to her Executive colleagues and locate funding for that package. That is what the Minister can do to make a difference.

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

We have only to listen to the figures that other Members gave. Mr Rogers, my colleague from South Down, listed places where incomes had dropped, catches had dropped and fuel costs had risen. He told us the percentages involved and the impact that all this is having. Michelle McIlveen talked about the impact of fishermen not even being able to fund their boat leaving the harbour. We have to address that. I very much hope that the Minister will say what is being done and what she will do. However, she must respond at a much quicker pace than she has done so far.

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

Mr McCallister: I support the motion.

Mr Allister: It is probably an understatement to say that the fishing industry is a very difficult and very dangerous industry. We had a sad reminder of the latter just last week when, off the coast of Southern Ireland, three brothers, all fishermen, tragically lost their life. In the comfortable lives that we collectively lead, it is easy to forget the discomfort in which fishermen operate and the dangers and difficulties that they face. It is an industry that is, sadly, taken for granted, not just by society but obviously, given the response that government makes to it, by government.

The point has been well made that, in recent weeks, we saw a response to the horrendous weather that afflicted our farming industry. Yet the same horrendous weather afflicted our fishing industry but went unheeded and without response. It seems, sadly, that the fishing industry is being taken for granted.

The fishing industry has also been taken for a ride by the European Union. If we contrast the state, the flourishing nature and the aspirations and achievements of our fishing industry in 1973, when we joined the European Union, with the situation in 2013, we see that it is like day and night. The industry has been sacrificed through the folly of the common fisheries policy to the point that it has been run down to near extinction in many places.

In these British Isles, we had the most flourishing and successful fishing industry: today, it is a mere shadow of itself.

That is by no accident but by the design of the common fisheries policy. Although we need to help the industry locally, we need to help it internationally by withdrawing powers over fishing policy from the European Union and repatriating them. European Union control over fishing policy has been a disaster for our fishing industry throughout the United Kingdom. That is a call that I reiterate today.

Under the common fisheries policy, we have seen the absurdity of the lamentably failing cod recovery scheme, which, year on year, has made things worse not better. We have seen the amoral approach to discard policy, where perfectly edible fish, courtesy of a Brussels diktat, by their hundreds of tons have been cast back into the sea to rot. That has happened because someone in Brussels thought that it was the right and smart thing to do. In the current reform of the common fisheries policy, we are told that the discard policy is going to be reversed. The sooner the better, because it has been a scandal for many years.

Also under the reform, we are told that there is to be more regional control over fisheries. Is there? When I look at the detail, the same infrastructural and overarching control of Brussels will exist, so Brussels will still be pulling the strings for how regions behave under the common fisheries policy.

Those cosmetic changes are not what we need. We need the repatriation of fisheries policy to the United Kingdom so that Members in the House, to whom that power could be devolved, can take decisions. They would have to stop hiding behind Brussels and blaming it for everything that goes wrong. Brussels is often properly blamed, but sometimes it is blamed out of convenience. It is time that the policy on fisheries was returned from Brussels to the United Kingdom, because it is an industry that can flourish. When I was a member of the European Parliament Fisheries Committee, I once made a visit to Norway. I was staggered by the contrast in the cod industry there to that here.

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

Mr Allister: There, I saw the vibrant success of the industry outside the EU. Inside the EU, we have seen the destruction of our industry.

Mr McNarry: During last week's debate on the Portavogie situation, I was struck by the fact that the value of the fishing industry to the Northern Ireland economy, if the catch taken by

Northern Ireland boats to ports outside Northern Ireland in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic is included, is an estimated £56 million. I was also struck by the fact that last week Mr Hazzard totalled the amount of support being given by the Minister to our fishing industry in recent times at just under £1 million. There we have it: £1 million support for a £56 million industry. That is support at a level of less than 2% of the value of the industry.

Fishing is undoubtedly the victim of our EU membership. Our exit is long overdue. Describing the common fisheries policy as the United Kingdom giving away the family silver gives us a clear vision of what has happened and continues to happen. The United Kingdom signed over control of British fishing grounds, which contained nearly 70% of Europe's fish. It signed those fishing grounds over to the EU common fisheries policy. Therefore, when you hear how much EU membership costs this United Kingdom, you need to factor into the gift that it has been given our fish resources going to foreign nations.

EU membership does not just cost us £10 billion net a year. On top of that, we gave away control of our fishing stocks to Europe. In 2008, the United Kingdom lost £3.3 billion because we allowed other countries to fish in our territorial waters under the common fisheries policy. In the same year, we lost £28 billion through businesses having to comply with EU regulations and £17 billion through additional costs resulting from the common agricultural policy. In the same year, £14.6 billion was paid into the EU Budget and other EU funds. The total cost to the United Kingdom of EU membership in 2008 was gross — it was £65 billion. Yet, here we are talking about it and doing nothing.

The very valid point to make in all these debates about seeking to adjust, or tweak, EU regulations or seeking some ex gratia payment from the Minister is that, while those are all welcome and worthy enough measures — and I recognise what the Minister has been doing — they do not address the central problem and core issue. As I said last week, we are treating the symptoms of the illness when we need to treat the illness itself, which is clearly our membership of the common fisheries policy and our membership of the EU.

As has been said, repatriation of the common fisheries policy from the EU is clearly the only way that we will be able to rebuild the fishing industry. If you tell fishermen anything else, you are telling them lies. You are deceiving them and raising expectations when you cannot

deliver. You will never be able to meet the expectations of the industry unless you assert our interests over those of every other European nation in our own territorial waters. It is about time that we stood up for Britain, stood up for the United Kingdom and took ourselves out of this nefarious EU and, in doing so, gave back to our nation's fishermen the right and integrity to do their job.

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Fortunately, I have a bit more of a voice to respond to this week's debate. I welcome the fact that this is our second debate on fishing in the past number of days. That, in itself, shows the fishing industry that the Assembly cares about it and that the Assembly and the Minister have the fishing industry's interests at the core of our thinking.

The motion states that the Assembly welcomes the efforts made by our fishermen to reduce by-catches of cod and unwanted fish species. I am happy to support that statement. I especially thank the fishermen, their representatives and the net makers who have worked with us in trialling new highly selective gear over the past 18 months. That work has saved the prawn fleet from the imposition of the Swedish grid, a device that most fishermen regard as impractical.

I further acknowledge that adopting those gears is not without expense. However, my Department has done its best to help with that cost. The 2012 trials were fully funded. Assistance was offered to install the Seltra device following successful trials on both twin and single rig vessels. We also funded a study tour of local fishermen to Norway and Denmark at the end of 2012, which generated further ideas on how to improve selectivity.

I accept that, despite successful trials, the Seltra trawl did not live up to expectations when it was rolled out across the fleet last October. We must remember that that is a time of year when prawn landings are normally at their lowest. Landing figures since 2000 show that October is the worst month for landings, with just 4% of the annual landings made in that month. Indeed, the fleet lands more prawns in August than it does in the last three months of the year combined. So, if you had a choice, you would perhaps not pick that time of year to roll out new gear. That fact, combined with difficulties in setting up the device, coloured opinion against it.

For those reasons, we took a pragmatic approach and gave the industry more time to

work with the gear. This year, we continued to look at alternative gears and trialled two further potential solutions suggested by fishermen. Both of them proved effective in reducing cod and other unwanted by-catch, with only a minimal loss of prawn catch. Members have referred to the particularly difficult time that fishermen have had as a result of the poor weather in March and the start of April. I fully accept, as I did in last week's debate, that that has had a dramatic effect on landings. However, landings for the whole fleet in February and May were more typical.

Members have called for an aid package similar to that offered to the farming community. However, I tried to make a distinction in last week's debate and I will do so again. I recognise that the weather impacted the fishing and farming industries. However, farmers have experienced physical stock and fodder losses that have to be replaced. On the other hand, when vessels are not fishing, fish quotas and days at sea are not used up. Others will dispute whether the industry may or may not have time to make up its quotas over the rest of the year. Some people will agree with that; some will not. As I said during the debate last week, I give an assurance to the industry and to the Members who brought forward the motion that I will keep the situation under review. I am watching the situation very closely.

2.15 pm

Members referred to the figures. At the end of May, prawn landings were down 22% compared with the five-year average at the same stage last year. Looking at the long-term landings data, we see that the fleet will usually land about 40% of the annual prawn catch between January and May. Therefore, the 22% drop for that period represents around 9% of annual average landings. Whilst I accept that the situation is dire for fishermen, I believe that there is an opportunity to make up the catch in the months ahead. However, I will certainly keep that situation under review. I gave that commitment to the House last week, and I stand over it today.

Last week, I also outlined the financial assistance and measures that I have put in place. Some of those involve working with the industry, which I want to work with to carry out an urgent review of need in respect of skills, safety and fuel efficiency. We will have to identify how we can use the tool of the EFF to better effect. I give a commitment to do that in the time ahead and to work with the industry on that.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does she acknowledge that, as I said in my two speeches on the fishing industry, there seem to be inequalities for the local fishing fleet, which says that other fishing fleets are allowed to come into its fishing areas, putting it at a disadvantage? If that is the case, will the Minister ensure that inequalities do not exist in the industry for our fleet?

Mrs O'Neill: I take my equality duty very seriously, and I will make sure that all inequalities are addressed across the Department, whether in fishing, farming or in rural communities. The fishing community quite often asks me about the rules and regulations on where can be fished. I am always mindful of that, and I will make sure that, in any discussions that we have with industry, we look to make sure that we can benefit our local industry.

The motion calls on me to deliver urgently a meaningful package of aid to assist fishermen who have helped me to comply with the commitments that I made to the EU Fisheries Council in December. John McCallister said that I made the commitment in the absence of corresponding with the industry. I assure him that I gave that commitment on the back of discussions with the industry. It made sure that the industry did not have a device imposed on it, because it did not want the Swedish grid. If we were not able to put that proposal to the Commission, the industry, at the start of the year, would have been sitting with a device that was unworkable and did not suit the local fleet. We would be in a much worse and more difficult situation if we had not done that.

Meeting the commitment we gave has resulted in our fleet operating with gear that is as effective and much more practical than the Swedish grid that the Commission was trying to impose upon us. Meeting that commitment has also meant that we have worked towards and made improvements, such as killing far fewer unwanted fish and making a real contribution to stock recovery, which, in the longer term, will be very positive for the fishing industry.

As I said during the Adjournment debate last week, I do not believe that, for the reasons that I have given, an aid package is justified at this time purely because of the bad weather. However, as I said, I am happy to keep that under review and work with the industry over the next number of months.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way at this crucial moment of the debate. I do not agree with her about the 22% figure. The profit-

making period is already lost to the fleet, and it will not make that up. It is 50% down on income because of that and the bad winter. What is the difference, Minister, between the situation now and when your predecessor implemented a financial aid package in 2009?

Mrs O'Neill: The hardship package in 2008 was in response to the circumstances at that time. The decision was based on that, and I assume that the business case was based on that and approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) at the time. If you remember, when that hardship package was initiated, it was welcomed by the industry, and, by the end of that year, the fishing industry had caught up. I have to be very careful because I am in charge of public money and am accountable to the Public Accounts Committee. Therefore I have to be able to stand over any proposal that I make. I acknowledge the difficulties and have taken measures to try to assist the industry, and I will keep the situation under review. That is far as I can go at the moment. Based on my assessment of the situation, I believe that there is time for the industry to make up a lot of the ground that it has lost as a result of the weather. That is the distinct difference between 2008 and where we are now. As I said, I am happy to keep that situation under review.

The measures that I have already talked about around research and development —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs O'Neill: OK.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister make a commitment that if, at the end of the effective fishing season, those losses have not been made up, she will produce a package? Will she give that commitment as a test of the veracity of her words today?

Mrs O'Neill: I have given a commitment today, and I gave a commitment last week in the debate, that I will keep the situation under review. I believe that there is an opportunity for them to make up the difference that they have lost out on over the past number of months. I am very happy to come back and have a debate in this House in a few months' time, when we can have another assessment of the situation. That is as firm a commitment as I will give. I will absolutely be mindful of the difficulties that are being posed towards the fishing industry and the difficult circumstances that it is working within. That is the commitment that I am giving.

Last week, I outlined the measures that I have taken forward around the research and development fund and working with the industry. Hundreds of thousands of pounds of support is going out into the industry to help it around the selective gear and other measures. I am happy to be able to bring those things forward. Is it enough? That will always be a matter of opinion. People will always have a different view on that.

I move to the issues that Members raised. The task force to the banks is a very practical example of a good piece of work that can be done. We have done that before and talked to banks on the issue of single farm payments, and we are very happy to go around the banks again and talk to them about the challenges for the fishing industry. That is a practical measure that can be done very quickly.

On the issue of reviewing the EFF, Chris Hazzard talked about looking at the processes. I think that there are opportunities that can be explored where we can look towards EFF and use it to better effect. On the back of discussions with the industry, we may be able to do something there. Members of the House will have their own political view on whether or not we should be part of Europe. I am critical about engagement with Europe quite often. I am critical about the bureaucracy and a lot of the red tape that comes with being part of the CFP, but you cannot pick and choose what you want to be part of. If you pull out of CFP, you pull out of CAP and you pull out of infrastructure support and Peace moneys. So you need to have a wider debate around that topic. To me, it is a much bigger picture that we need to be looking at of the hundreds of millions of pounds that we get in support through CAP, CFP, infrastructure support and Peace moneys. That is a bigger debate.

I welcome the fact that we have had the debate again. I have set out my commitments last week, and again today. I want to work with the industry, as I value it as a key part of the agrifood sector. The thinking and process behind the agrifood strategy is around looking at the challenges that are posed to the agrifood industry in its entirety. Everyone — farming, fishing; no matter what end you are coming from — needs to look at the challenges for the industry. We need to look to the future. We need to look at how we can support the industry in the Executive and at how we can work in partnership to make sure that we grow that industry. That is the commitment that I am giving to the House today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, the next item on the Order Paper is Question Time, which commences at 2.30 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 2.23 pm.

On resuming —

Assembly Business

2.30 pm

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Has it not gone past 2.30 pm and was the House not to resume at 2.30 pm? Is there a reason why we have not resumed?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is quite right: it is time for questions to the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. I am pleased that the Minister is now arriving.

Oral Answers to Questions

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Transforming Your Care

1. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on how he will address the concerns about Transforming Your Care as outlined in the motion which was debated in the Assembly on 28 May 2013. (AQO 4287/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I set out my intentions in response to contributions to the debate on 20 May, and they have not changed. I called a halt to the trusts' consultations on home closure proposals and put in place a new process for consultation, communication and engagement. I will continue to use all options available to me, including the independent sector, to help drive down waiting lists and provide the best possible care for our citizens. I will not introduce legislation that would prevent me from responding in a flexible manner to any healthcare issues that may arise.

'Transforming Your Care' set out a compelling case for changes to our health and social care system and has been widely accepted by those who work in the sector and by the community they serve. We need to make the changes required to improve patient experience, and we need to do it in a transparent and sensitive way. I am committed to doing so.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you, Minister, for your answer so far. With regard to the recent debacle around residential care, have all residents who are currently in residential care homes been informed that they will not be asked to move from their home?

Mr Poots: As Minister, I have corresponded with every resident individually. I have explained that a new process will be put in place that will be headed up by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and that the proposals to close the residential homes have been discontinued.

Ms Brown: In relation to TYC and the spend that the Department is making on private providers, what is the comparison with the spend in previous years?

Mr Poots: The spend in the independent sector was £52.6 million in 2011-12, and it was £24.7 million in the previous year. In 2009-2010, it was £57.5 million. There has actually been a reduction in spend in the private sector under the DUP, as opposed to that under the Ulster Unionist Minister at that time. We continue to drive down waiting lists as well, and we will use the independent sector to assist us in that where it is appropriate to do so.

Mr McDevitt: I note the Minister's reply that he will not introduce legislation that would prevent him from "responding in a flexible manner". I think that we would all agree. However, does the Minister not accept that the point of legislation is to demarcate clearly the areas of health and social care in which the House as a whole wishes him to be able to respond in a flexible manner and, therefore, bring more clarity to the Transforming Your Care strategy?

Mr Poots: Legislation needs to benefit communities and not cause problems and harm. I note the difference in tone between Mr McDevitt and his predecessor, Carmel Hanna, who was MLA for South Belfast. When she was at the opening of the privately built Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education (BIFHE) Millfield campus, she made the case that PFI opened opportunities for private sector innovation in management, teaching, accommodation and services. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Poots: I remind Mr McDevitt that, in its 2011 manifesto, the SDLP said that it would:

"commission a study into current levels of community service provision leading to a strategy and action plan aimed at greater involvement by the voluntary and community sector in health and social care provision here".

I agree with what the SDLP has said, and it would be good if the Member got on board with his party.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give an assurance that, at the end of the implementation of Transforming Your Care, there will be and he wishes there to be a section of residential care that will be retained in National Health Service provision?

Mr Poots: I want our elderly population to receive the best possible care. I recommend that all Members visit the Cedar Court facility that Minister McCausland and I opened in

Downpatrick last Thursday. When you visit, you should speak to the residents, the care providers — the people who are employed by us — and the relatives. All those people will say, "We were previously in residential care situations, but what is being offered here is substantially better. This is the way forward for health and social care for our elderly population". I invite any Member to visit such a facility and say that my vision for that is wrong.

Tobacco Products

2. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, following the recent proposals by the Irish Government for plain packaging of tobacco products, whether he has any plans to take the same action. (AQO 4288/11-15)

Mr Poots: I support measures that lead to a reduction in the uptake of smoking by children and young people, which is why I agreed to the inclusion of Northern Ireland in a UK-wide consultation exercise on standardised packaging for tobacco products. That was led by the Department of Health in London. The consultation responses at a UK-wide level and for each devolved Administration are being considered. Ideally, I would like a UK-wide approach taken on standardised packaging, and I recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Health to encourage him to come to an early decision on the issue.

Mr Milne: It is useful to have those comments from the Minister. Has he had representations from elected representatives against the proposal?

Mr Poots: I am not sure whether we have received any written representation. I have not gone through them all to identify whether that is the case, but I know that arguments have been put for and against the issue. One of the more considerable arguments for this is that cigarette companies are targeting particular groups — women are being targeted with slimline coloured packaging — and there is a significant issue with smuggled tobacco. In Northern Ireland, we have a big problem with criminal activity in illicit trade such as tobacco, fuel smuggling and alcohol bootlegging. One of the biggest problems is that around one third of the tobacco that is sold in Northern Ireland is illegal, and it is being sold at around £2 a packet. If we really want to drive down the number of people smoking, we need to get to the nub of the issue: the criminal industry. A significant issue that is being raised with me is that plain packaging may not be beneficial on that front and may be

detrimental. I am not convinced of that argument.

Mr G Robinson: What actions are being taken to address the possible risks from electronic cigarettes?

Mr Poots: Electronic cigarettes are unregulated, and, thus, little is known about the quality, safety and efficacy of such a product. I support the recent decisions by the MHRA to regulate these products within a proportionate regulatory regime. I also wish to look at the MHRA report in detail when considering the potential contribution that such products could make to tobacco-related harm and a reduction in smoking.

Mr Kinahan: I want a bit more clarification. We are told that tobacco companies need to find another 2,300 young people to smoke to keep their market share. Does the Minister agree that the way forward is to keep the graphic pictures on cigarette packets to put people off?

Mr Poots: We are in a consultation process. Australia has introduced plain packaging, and the Republic of Ireland appears to be moving ahead on that, too. Cigarette companies use packaging as a marketing exercise. There is a judgement call to be made on whether that is the greater problem or whether the greater problem would be people potentially being able to provide illicit cigarettes more easily as a consequence of moving to plain packaging. That debate is taking place. I have not committed to either side at this point because I am not fully convinced by either side. I will need more time to come to a decision.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to continue to rise in their place if they wish to ask a supplementary question.

Judith Cochrane is not in her place. I call Ian McCrea.

Hospitals: Waiting Times

4. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on progress on reducing inpatient and outpatient waiting times. (AQO 4290/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am pleased to report that the hospital waiting list statistics for the year ended 31 March 2013 show a marked improvement on the previous year, with a reduction in the total number of people waiting for outpatient appointments and inpatient or day case

treatment, compared with March 2012. There was a reduction of 3.2% in the number of people waiting for a first outpatient appointment, from 103,029 in March 2012 to 99,774 in March 2013. Significantly, the proportion of people waiting for less than 9 weeks has risen to 80.2%, compared with 72.6% in March 2012. The number of people waiting for inpatient and day case treatment reduced by 6.2%, from 50,829 in March 2012 to 47,689 in March 2013. The proportion waiting for less than 13 weeks has risen to 68.8%, compared with 64.4% in March 2012.

I welcome the improvement but accept that work needs to be done to reduce waiting times to an acceptable level for all patients. The continued reduction in hospital waiting times is, therefore, a key priority for my Department against a backdrop of ever-increasing demand for hospital services. So I have set more challenging targets to be achieved by March 2014, and I look to the Health and Social Care Board to work with trusts to meet them.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the Minister's commitment to continuing to drive down those targets. Can the Minister detail figures from other years so that we can see how they compare from year to year?

Mr Poots: In previous years and from last year, there has been a marked reduction. The number waiting for an outpatient appointment was reduced by 6,432 — 6% — from 2011-12, and the number waiting for nine weeks has been reduced by 12,145 or 38%. The number waiting for inpatient admission has been reduced by 5,191, which equates to 10%, and the number waiting for longer than 13 weeks has been reduced by 2,754, which equates to 16%. Members can see that, year on year, we are making a significant dent in waiting times and delivering for the people of Northern Ireland. We will continue that work.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I was interested in the Minister's response to the question. Is the Minister inclined to take a run at the issue of appointments cancelled by consultants and hospitals as opposed to those who do not weigh in for their appointment? Considering that over 180,000 appointments were cancelled last year, that would have an impact on waiting times.

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for her question. We are certainly looking at how to ensure that there is a better response from those in hospitals who provide the service and that

fewer appointments are cancelled by consultants. Hopefully, we can make progress on that front because cancellations do not always come from the individuals who are waiting to see a consultant.

2.45 pm

Mr Dallat: I commend the Minister for any reduction in waiting times. Can he give the House an assurance that the day will soon come when people are not forced to switch to private practice to obtain a consultation?

Mr Poots: I wish that I could give the Member a straight yes to that question, but I cannot. In the health service, we are constrained in many ways because of contracts. The Member will know, for example, that doctors are private contractors. They negotiate in London at a UK-wide level. Therefore, some of the issues that I have that relate to long waiting lists will not be challenged just as easily as that, because we operate under significant constraints. Our acquisition of services to reduce waiting lists reduces the power of individuals in that respect. That should be welcomed, because it will enable us to continue to drive down waiting times and make it less desirable for people to go private. In some instances, it is not that it is desirable; sometimes people feel that they have no choice but to go private because they cannot stand the pain. We are working on reducing that time in order to allow people to have greater choice when it comes to their healthcare.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Megan Fearon is not in her place.

Water Fluoridation

6. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the proposals to fluoridate the water supply. (AQO 4292/11-15)

Mr Poots: I am still considering my position on the fluoridation of water supplies in Northern Ireland and will continue to consult Executive colleagues on the matter before I come to a decision. I have not formally brought proposals to the Executive on the matter. If a proposal to fluoridate water supplies is made, appropriate evidence from reputable scientific and medical sources will be considered. We are required under the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to consult and ascertain public opinion. I recognise that there are strongly held opinions. Should such a

consultation proceed, I will welcome the views of all interested parties at that time.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Minister for the update. Can he outline both the nature and quantity of correspondence that he has received on the issue to date? I appreciate that it has not gone out to full public consultation, but I anticipate that he has had some correspondence. Does he agree that fluoridation could not be imposed on society and could be done only with community consent?

Mr Poots: As the Member rightly points out, we have not gone out to consultation. I have received correspondence on it from people who seem to think that the internet is the most reputable source of scientific information available and from people who do not recognise the oral problems that exist in Northern Ireland. We have some of the worst standards in Europe for dental outcomes, particularly for children and young people. People make all sorts of ludicrous claims. I have received correspondence from some people along those lines.

Mr Campbell: The Minister has just referred to the dental health of our younger generation. Can he outline some of the plans, proposals and actions that are being undertaken to ensure that dental decay among the younger generation is reduced?

Mr Poots: We cannot simply sit back and allow dental deterioration in young people. We have to move forward. For example, we have fluoride toothpaste schemes. The schemes were established by DHSSPS and are aimed at five-year-old children in the 20 most deprived areas of Northern Ireland. That is an evidence-based intervention whereby free fluoride toothpaste is given out. The scheme was in place in all trusts by September 2005. Since 2005, we have provided additional fees to be made available to dental practitioners for fissure sealants targeted at newly erupted first and second molar teeth. That evidence-based intervention places a protective plastic coating on teeth when they are at the greatest risk of decay. It reduces food and plaque accumulation and makes the teeth easier to clean. We have also introduced capitation payments for dentists who provide care to children from deprived areas. We have been focusing work on community dental services and high-priority areas, such as providing care for children from socially disadvantaged areas and evidence-based oral health improvement programmes. So, we are doing a series of things and will continue to do so.

It is absolutely incumbent on us to improve the circumstance that we have children as young as two who have had most of their teeth extracted. I know that some Members may dismiss all that and think that it is unimportant that we provide good dental care or ensure that children have a good start to life as regards their dental care, but I think that it is a very important issue. We will be guided on this not by the internet but by the scientific evidence provided to me from reputable sources.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister believe that tackling health inequalities in their totality will help to eradicate oral health and dental issues?

Mr Poots: I accept the Member's point. That is why we engage in schemes such as the family nurse partnership, why we support schemes such as Sure Start and why we will support the scheme that the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister recently proposed, which will ensure that we provide more help to parents who very often find themselves in vulnerable situations in order to ensure that their children get the best start in life.

Teenage Pregnancies

7. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made on reducing the number of teenage pregnancies. (AQO 4293/11-15)

Mr Poots: Good progress has been made on reducing the number of unplanned births to teenage mothers. In 2012, the provisional number of births to teenage mothers was 1,100. That is the lowest figure recorded in almost 40 years and represents a 27% reduction since 2002. A range of programmes and services to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy has been taken forward in line with the actions in my Department's sexual promotion strategy and action plan.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome the figures, which show that schools and communities do good work around prevention. Minister, can you confirm that Marie Stopes has applied for RQIA regulation of its clinic and tell us the extent of any regulation that the RQIA can offer?

Mr Poots: I will not comment on individual organisations that may have applied for registration — that is an operational matter for the RQIA — but any clinic or organisation that

applies for registration would be subject to an inspection by the RQIA on at least an annual basis. The inspection covers areas such as the nature of the built environment; record keeping; employment and regulatory arrangements for staff; and the procurement, storage and dispensing of medication. It will also address the care and welfare of patients; the numbers, qualifications and experience of staff and their fitness to perform their work; professional practice; records; staff views; complaints; fitness of premises; financial viability; and notification of events. However, the RQIA does not regulate the individual services provided by the establishment or the individual procedures undertaken. Furthermore, the RQIA does not have statutory powers to assess clinical decisions.

I recognise that there is huge public interest in providing confidence that the law is being upheld. I know that the Justice Minister has indicated that he intends to bring a paper to the Executive, and I look forward to seeing that.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: I welcome the figures. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Minister of Education about teenage pregnancies or teenage parenthood?

Mr Poots: The Health Department and the Department of Education have been working together on those issues for many years. Certainly, education has a key role in providing information to young people and making sure that they are well informed on the issues. We can have no doubt that education played a key role in ensuring that we actually drove down the numbers. We are looking at reviewing the teenage pregnancy and parenthood strategy in the future.

The following recommendations will also be considered: the extension of the sexual health promotion strategy and action plan; actions to resolve and progress issues surrounding young people's confidentiality; the issue of guideline leaflets, which will be taken forward by the sexual health improvement network; and support to the young parents element of the teenage pregnancy and parenthood strategy, which will be adapted by the sexual health improvement network to include information on parenting rights, responsibilities and fatherhood.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and welcome the reduced figures. As the Minister said, quality sex education has a role to play in reducing the figures. Is the

Department taking or planning any joint actions with the Department of Education in that respect?

Mr Poots: On relationship and sexuality education (RSE), the Public Health Agency, for example, is working in partnership with the Department of Education and the education and library boards to provide training and support to teachers. A number of voluntary organisations including Aids Care Education and Training, the Family Planning Association, Love for Life and so forth are commissioned to deliver RSE programmes in youth and community settings. RSE training programmes are also commissioned for parents, carers and staff working with young people.

Health and Social Care Board: Commissioning Plans

8. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he has any plans to reinstate the practice of routinely publishing the communications issued to the Health and Social Care Board instigating the development of a commissioning plan for a specific technology appraisal, in order to increase transparency and enable effective monitoring of the process. (AQO 4294/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department does not currently have any plans to publish the communications issued to the HSC board. The key information from them is already put on my Department's website within a day of the communication being sent to the HSC Board. An annual report is being produced that will set out relevant monitoring information. The first one covers a period of 18 months from the introduction of the new process. The HSC Board web page for the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence has been online since April 2013 and includes a summary of service notifications or commissioning plans issued by the HSC board with respect to technology appraisals since September 2011. The web page can be accessed through the HSC Board's website.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister explain to the House why this region is so far behind the rest of the UK in sanctioning new technology in commissioning for treatment for diseases such as cancer?

Mr Poots: There could be a number of reasons for that. This region has benefits that others do not. For example, if you receive domiciliary care at home, you do not pay for that in this region, but you pay for it in other regions of the

UK. That is a substantial expense for our health and social care service, and, if Members are saying that we should remove that service to the public, that would certainly create more funding for other services. There are other things, such as free prescriptions. I have indicated to the House — I have put a paper to the Executive — that I think it is wrong that many people in the Chamber, for example, receive free prescriptions who could well afford them while there are others waiting for cancer treatments who cannot get the drugs because we do not have that funding available. I have suggested that we should have some form of prescription charge so that we can buy specialist drugs to support people who have cancer and other life-limiting illnesses. I would be happy to have the support of the House to drive things forward in order to ensure that we provide the greatest level of care for people who have cancer and other serious illnesses in a way that may be available in other parts of the UK.

Rathmoyle Residential Home, Ballycastle

9. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether the proposed closure of Rathmoyle residential home in Ballycastle has been halted, pending the outcome of the review by the Health and Social Care Board. (AQO 4295/11-15)

Mr Poots: I want the best available care for all our older people. That means change will be required, and I am already on record as supporting a change in the model of care as outlined in 'Transforming Your Care: from Vision to Action'. I know that Rathmoyle statutory residential care home is one of the sites scheduled for some time for the development of a supported living scheme and that there has been considerable local engagement on those proposals. Where individual care plans have been agreed regarding the movement of residents from one facility to another, I do not wish to disrupt or cause any upset to those plans. However, the pace of change for other residents and clients is important. I want to be sure that no undue pressure is placed on individuals, including those who receive day care and respite provision at Rathmoyle.

3.00 pm

Before any decision is taken on the future of Rathmoyle, my Department will expect the HSC Board to provide an assurance that past consultation, engagement and analysis of

responses have followed best practice and that the current arrangements for engagements with residents and families are appropriate. I do not wish to see further change in arrangements at Rathmoyle until the HSC Board assures the Department that good suitable alternatives for daycare and respite provisions are in place and working well.

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: I see that Mr Flanagan is not in his place.

Social Housing Programme

2. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister for Social Development for a breakdown of the make-up of the social housing development programme over the last two years. (AQO 4303/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): In the 2011-12 financial year, there were 114 newbuild schemes, which comprised a total of 1,410 units, with a housing association grant spend of £139,820,000. Of those 1,410 units, 96 were supported housing units, 181 were rural needs units, and 1,133 were urban needs units. Those units were made up of 984 newbuilds, 275 off-the-shelf purchases, 109 existing satisfactory purchases, 34 rehabilitations and eight re-improvements.

In the 2012-13 financial year, there were 89 newbuild schemes, comprising a total of 1,379 units, with a housing association grant spend of £83,661,000. Of those 1,379 units, six were Travellers' units, 163 were supported housing units, 118 were rural needs units, and 1,092 were urban needs units. These units were made up of 1,036 newbuilds, 130 off-the-shelf purchases, 111 existing satisfactory purchases, 72 rehabilitations and 30 re-improvements.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that sometimes the information given can be unclear as to how many actual houses were completed in one financial year? Sometimes there is too much information about overlap and not enough firm information on what was actually completed in one financial year.

Mr McCausland: I accept that the situation is that work very often starts in one financial year and runs into the next one. However, if houses are not included in the figure for one year, they will obviously follow in the figure for the

subsequent year. The important thing is that we have plenty of good information so that Members are well informed. I am always happy to provide information on these matters.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined the case over the past number of years. Can he outline what the capacity issue will be in the next two years, for example, as he plans for that time period?

Mr McCausland: The Member raises an important point about capacity. The fact is that, in the 2012-13 year, there was an underspend of £8 million. The reasons for that are several. In one sense, it is the result of the fact that housing can now be provided more cheaply than previously. Indeed, land purchases are much cheaper than they would have been in previous years. Also, in Northern Ireland, we have 29 registered housing associations. However, in both the past two years, less than half of those have been involved in delivering new housing. In fact, in each of those two years, four housing associations delivered close to 80% of the programme. When you have 80% of the housing being provided by four housing associations out of a total of 29, you can see that the others are not contributing in any major way.

That leads me on to another issue, I suppose: that there may be a possibility of looking at another provider. I do not want to go down that road, but if housing associations cannot step up to the mark, there will always have to be a look at a last resort.

We are also looking at the whole social housing development programme, and I have asked the performance and efficiency delivery unit of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to carry out a study in that regard. I am not convinced that it will, necessarily, address the housing associations' apparent unwillingness to deliver more. They could and should be delivering more.

We are putting a real challenge to the Housing Executive about how it operates the programme. There is also a big challenge to the housing associations, particularly those that are delivering nothing in the way of newbuilds.

Mr Lyttle: Given the encouragement that the US President gave this morning for more integrated housing — he said that it was essential for peace in Northern Ireland — how much of this housing was of a mixed or shared nature?

Mr McCausland: As the Member will be aware, housing is allocated on the basis of need. In a particular common landlord area, housing will be allocated according to the need in that area. I would not have any details on the precise breakdown of that. If you have a mixed area, it is generally the case that people will come from both communities to live in that area. If an area is exclusively of one community, generally the people who come to live there are from that community. That has been a fact over the past while. The Member will be aware, however, that there were a number of references to shared housing in the recent package of proposals that emanated from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Copeland: The Minister will be aware, as I am, that the social housing development plan was agreed in January 2012. Since then, the Minister and a number of his officials have intervened and added, in a welcome way, other areas to the newbuild programme. Some of that took place a number of months afterwards.

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

Mr Copeland: Given that precedent, will the Minister detail whether he has yet intervened to seek additional changes to the proposed programme in light of the proposals that are contained in welfare reform?

Mr McCausland: As soon as the direction of welfare reform became clear, I met the Housing Executive and challenged it on the nature of the social housing development programme. I posed the question whether, in drawing up that programme, it had taken account of welfare reform. The answer was no. So, I sent it away to do some additional work, and you can see the results and fruits of that starting to come through in the provision of a more appropriate mix of sizes of accommodation.

I would pick up on one point that the Member raised: the social housing development programme. Each year, I am asked to approve a programme, and, last year, only one third of the programme that I approved was delivered. You approve a programme, but what emerges on the ground bears little resemblance to it. The housing associations, for whatever reason, do not deliver on those particular programmes, but other programmes emerge. That is why we need to look holistically at the social housing development programme. There is very little point in bringing me a package of proposals at the start of the year for schemes here, there and elsewhere when what is created at the end

of the year ends up bearing virtually no resemblance to that.

Last year, £40 million of the funding for the programme was spent in the last two days of March and 60% of the units were delivered on the last three working days of the financial year. Those sort of issues need to be looked at more thoroughly.

Social Housing: Energy Efficiency

3. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister for Social Development what checks are carried out to ensure the energy efficiency of social housing stock. (AQO 4304/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Housing Executive has almost completed the production of energy performance certificates (EPCs) for its entire stock. EPCs detail the energy performance of each dwelling and take account of factors such as insulation, double glazing and heating type. The majority of the housing association stock is relatively new, and most of it has been built to level 3 in the code for sustainable homes. Since the last financial year, all new social housing stock is built to new building regulations standards.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. What action has his Department taken to ensure that cavity wall insulation is installed in historical and new social housing stock?

Mr McCausland: I am conscious of that issue and have raised it; first, because of experience of my constituents highlighting the difficulties that they had not only of energy efficiency but of dampness penetrating walls. So, we have put that to the Housing Executive and a work programme is being developed in that regard.

Ms Brown: What is the Minister's Department offering the privately owned and rented sectors by way of energy efficiency?

Mr McCausland: The warm homes scheme is my Department's major energy efficiency improvement scheme. It is also my Department's primary tool in tackling fuel poverty. That scheme is administered by the Housing Executive and delivered by scheme managers Bryson Energy and H&A Mechanical Services. The scheme offers a range of insulation and heating measures to householders in receipt of a qualifying benefit;

they may be able to receive help with insulating their homes. Householders eligible for warm homes plus may be entitled to installation of a fully controlled energy-efficient oil or gas central heating system, where no heating system currently exists. The measures delivered by warm homes make a home warmer and more energy-efficient.

We also have the boiler replacement scheme, which is funded by my Department and aimed at owner-occupiers whose total gross income is less than £40,000 and who have an existing boiler that must be at least 15 years old. In some cases, that has delivered a much-appreciated increase in fuel efficiency of as much as 30%.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline what impact energy efficiency in social housing has on fuel poverty?

Mr McCausland: The three things that cause or contribute to fuel poverty are the cost of fuel, the level of income in the home and the energy efficiency of the home, which we can directly impact on. We can do a lot around income, such as through benefit uptake programmes, which can help in some cases. There is more limited control over the cost of fuels, because that is influenced by international markets. However, energy efficiency of homes is hugely important in being something that we can really tackle and deal with locally.

Housing Executive: Housing Standards

4. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Social Development whether the standards for housing set by the Housing Executive have fallen in the last five years. (AQO 4305/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The standards for all new social housing are set by my Department, not by the Housing Executive. Key objectives of the housing strategy for Northern Ireland are to reduce the burden on social housing construction and to harmonise standards with those used for private housing development. My Department's current design standards for newbuild social housing, effective from April 2012, require housing associations to continue to build high-quality homes that not only meet the higher energy and carbon emissions requirements of the new building regulations that were launched in October 2012, but ensure that they are safe, flexible, adaptable and accessible.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Have housing associations that have provided the high-quality work that the Minister talked about been instructed by his Department to use cheaper materials or meet the cost themselves?

Mr McCausland: No. In fact, an incentive by way of a modest increase in construction cost allowances of 3% is available to associations that choose to build to the full code level 3 standards.

Ms P Bradley: Minister, what is the Department's policy in relation to compliance with the lifetime homes standards?

Mr McCausland: The Department's design standards require housing associations to comply with lifetime homes standards. Subject to approval, associations may deviate from those, depending on local conditions and viability.

Mr McCarthy: Has the Minister had any reason to exercise deterrents in relation to those that did not come up to the standards expected by his Department?

3.15 pm

Mr McCausland: No; the standard of house building by housing associations has been good. I identified the problem earlier: it is not the quality but the quantity. We are not seeing throughput or delivery. A small number of housing associations are doing an excellent job by building plenty of homes — 80% of the total — but the others are falling far short. They have property portfolios. They own a number of properties and have collateral, so they should be able to borrow and to build, but that is just not happening.

Housing Executive: No-fines Construction

5. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the number of Housing Executive homes in the Lagan Valley constituency that are no-fines construction. (AQO 4306/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My attention was seized by the issue of no-fines houses when I learned that some 5,000 Housing Executive properties across Northern Ireland were of no-fines construction. For the benefit of Members: no-fines houses are constructed from a type of

single-skin concrete wall with no cavity. I believe that those properties would benefit from a programme of external insulation, and I asked the Housing Executive to develop such a programme urgently for all houses of no-fines construction, prioritising those properties most in need.

In Northern Ireland, over 9,000 Housing Executive homes, including the no-fines homes, are of solid-wall construction: that is, they have no cavity walls. Those include 740 Orlits, 615 Easiform properties, 801 rural cottages and 3,444 pre-1940s terraced houses. Some 2,470 housing association properties are also of solid-wall construction.

As for the number of homes in the Lagan Valley constituency that are of no-fines construction, that information is not available in the format requested because the Housing Executive does not routinely collate information by parliamentary constituency. However, it has advised me that 688 homes of no-fines construction are located in its Antrim Street and Dairy Farm Lisburn district office areas and its Banbridge district office area, which comprise the Lagan Valley constituency.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he inform the Chamber what action the Housing Executive has taken so far?

Mr McCausland: I took that up with the Housing Executive some time ago. Many constituents were coming into my office saying that their houses were cold and damp and had been like that for many years, but were being told that the problem was condensation. When we got to the bottom of the issue, we discovered — not directly from the Housing Executive but from other sources — that the problem was no-fines construction.

There are major issues not only about heat loss but about dampness. I requested an urgent report from the Housing Executive. It produced a paper on no-fines houses with key objectives and recommendations, which was approved by the chief executive's business committee on 3 June. The Housing Executive now has a working group to progress its strategic approach to the thermal performance of all of its no-fines stock. That group will initially consider the technical solutions available and, once options and costs are known, will evaluate the strategic direction for all no-fines houses.

The Housing Executive is also involved in a project that is funded by Technology Strategy Board research and development with seven other partners that aims to carry out an external

insulation of five properties in one of the Housing Executive's no-fines estates. I might add that, on a recent visit with the vice-chair of the Housing Executive to look at housing experience as it is delivered in England, particularly in Liverpool and Manchester, I saw at first hand examples of no-fines houses that had been treated with a particular approach that addresses the problem. One of the tenants said that it was a great job because when the work was being carried out, she did not have to leave her home, and since it had been done, she has not turned the heat on for two months. I am sure that people who live in the substandard conditions of many of those no-fines houses — they have possibly been living in them for decades —

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

Mr McCausland: — could also benefit in that way.

Mrs Dobson: Will the Minister detail whether those properties have ever been prioritised in previous initiatives to improve their thermal performance? If not, does the Minister believe that that may have been a slight oversight?

Mr McCausland: I think that the word "slight" is inappropriate; it was a major oversight. We await the full report, but I have made direct enquiries about what reports were produced on a particular estate over a period of years. A couple of reports produced in preparation for ECM schemes mentioned the walls but suggested that nothing be done about them. As far as I can gather from the information that I have so far, it seems that there was no approach at all over the years to tackling the issue until I raised it with the Executive. Whether the issue is double glazing installation or houses without cavity wall insulation, it confirms that we have made energy efficiency right up there as a priority.

It sounds as though I am always having a go at the Housing Executive, but, in this case, there are more than reasonable grounds — very strong grounds — for saying that this is unacceptable. People should not be expected to live in cold and damp conditions.

Mr Allister: Good as it would be to make provision for these houses, can the Minister say whether he is being lobbied directly, or indirectly, by a party colleague whose family have an interest in a company that just happens to provide this external insulation?

Mr McCausland: The answer to that is no. I speak as a complete amateur in technical things. I was convinced that the only thing that could be done with these houses was to knock them down. That was until the vice-chair of the Housing Executive took me to look at houses in Liverpool, and, when I saw what had been done there, I was convinced otherwise. I saw not only a house with transformed energy efficiency but the very attractive job that had been done to make it look much more modern in style.

In Northern Ireland, we need to learn from others and look at a range of ways of doing things. I mentioned Liverpool and Manchester, although I recently visited Dundee to look at examples of good practice there and to compare and contrast that with what is being done in England. There is a lot of work to be done on that. The Housing Executive officials with me were also very impressed by the good practice in Great Britain.

Derelict Homes

6. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Social Development what opportunities exist for community-based social economy organisations to carry out building work on derelict and empty homes on behalf of the Housing Executive. (AQO 4307/11-15)

Mr McCausland: The Northern Ireland Housing Executive is bound by its standing orders, Northern Ireland public procurement policy and the Public Contracts Regulations 2006. They require the Housing Executive to procure all supplies, works and services in accordance with the policy and regulations. Although contracts are not directly awarded to community-based social economy organisations, it is possible for my Department to approve direct awards, but there would need to be a compelling business case. My Department is, however, consulting on a policy for community asset transfer, and the Housing Executive is considering potential opportunities to work with community-based social economy projects through such a policy to develop opportunities for social enterprise in social housing areas to foster community sustainability.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. He will know that many community organisations are to the fore in driving forward developments and identifying needs in their area. To that extent, would he encourage organisations, such as those in my constituency — for example, the Resurgam Trust — to continue that work? Would he also encourage

the Housing Executive to develop and implement such a policy?

Mr McCausland: I am very familiar with the work of the Resurgam Trust in the Lisburn area. I commend its efforts to promote the social economy model to regenerate local communities and provide real employment opportunities for people in disadvantaged communities. My Department is supporting a social economy growth pilot project through the trust. I am aware that the organisation is keen to explore other opportunities that will become available through the new policy framework for community asset transfer. So the direct answer to your question is yes, we should encourage that, and public sector organisations should encourage a social economy approach where possible.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith as na freagraí. Will the Minister give us some idea of the safeguards that are in place, if any, to ensure that properties that are brought to that particular standard through the Get Britain Building scheme are not subsequently sold on in a speculative transaction?

Mr McCausland: So far, only one housing association has received moneys from the Get Britain Building fund to take forward an initiative that will bring up to 150 empty homes back into use over the next few years.

I take the Member's point on board. My understanding is that the particular model that is being looked at would preclude that possibility. I am happy to get back to the Member with further information if it is required.

Mr Cree: It is self-evident that the longer that a property remains empty, the more costly that it is likely to be to get it back into service. With 20,000 applicants in housing stress, there cannot be an argument for having empty or derelict houses. How many empty or derelict houses are there at present and how does that number compare with the situation in 2007 at the height of the building boom?

Mr McCausland: Empty homes come in different shapes, sizes and styles, and it is difficult to come up with precise figures. Some time ago, we asked the Housing Executive to take forward a piece of work that looked at two areas where we thought there were quite a number of empty homes. When the Housing Executive's representatives knocked on doors and checked back, it transpired that properties

that seemed to be empty turned out not to be empty but simply appeared to be so. Therefore, it is very difficult to put a precise number on these things.

However, there are older houses that have been largely abandoned and allowed to run down, and there are new properties that are almost but not quite finished. It is quite a diverse mix. The Member raises a crucial point, which is that at a time of housing need, when the construction industry needs work, it is bizarre that properties are sitting there that could be brought into use. That could create work, create new homes and remove a potential blight, whether in the form of an old house or a building site that becomes a gathering ground for antisocial behaviour because houses are unfinished. It is a three-way win, in the form of houses, work and the removal of blight.

Benefits: Atos assessments

7. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the service provided by Atos, which has resulted in a large number of people losing their entitlement to incapacity benefit or employment and support allowance. (AQO 4308/11-15)

Mr McCausland: Prior to my taking up office in May 2011, the Northern Ireland Assembly approved the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007, which set down the eligibility criteria for determining entitlement to employment and support allowance and the requirement to undergo a work capability assessment as part of the eligibility process.

Atos Healthcare was awarded the contract in December 2010, and since June 2011 it has been providing medical advice and work capability assessments to support Social Security Agency officials to make decisions under the legislation.

The services provided by Atos Healthcare are governed by a commercial agreement between my Department and Atos. The agreement includes a performance model with a range of contractual service levels against which the supplier's performance is measured. The work capability assessment is carried out by local healthcare professionals who are employed by Atos to assess the functional capability for work of claimants who are claiming, or being reassessed for, employment and support allowance.

In agreeing to the introduction of the work capability assessment, the Northern Ireland Assembly recognised that it would need to be kept under review, and such a provision was made in section 10 of the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2007. Professor Malcolm Harrington, an occupational health specialist, was subsequently appointed to undertake the three annual reviews in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. To date, 34 out of 37 of his recommendations that are relevant to the Social Security Agency have been implemented. My Department is now working with Professor Harrington's replacement, Dr Paul Litchfield, to examine ways in which to continue to make improvements.

I recognise the concerns that have been raised by some Members about some individual cases brought to their attention. It is therefore important that Atos Healthcare's medical processes, training, recruitment and medical outcomes are regularly monitored and audited to ensure that a high level of service is achieved. In August 2011, my Department appointed an independent health assessment adviser —

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

Mr McCausland: — who is a medical health professional, to provide an independent assurance on the quality of all processes and outcomes.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer.

I am sure that the Minister is aware of the contention and controversy around this service, given that the primacy of medical evidence has been relegated and that a large number of claimants have lost their entitlement. Will he tell me what percentage of claimants who lost their entitlement won their cases on appeal?

3.30 pm

Mr McCausland: During the period June 2011 to April 2013, 120,061 claimants completed a work capability assessment. Of those, 34% of claimants were disallowed and 66% were allowed, of which 43% were assigned to the support group and 52% were assigned to the work related activity group. Work is ongoing in regard to the other 5%.

The Member raises the issue of people who win cases on appeal. I do not have the precise

figure he asked for in front of me, but I will supply it. The key thing for me is that it is important that all of the relevant medical information is made available at the earliest point in the process. Generally, when appeals are upheld, it is because information that was not available at an earlier stage is provided. I encourage MLAs and people who operate advice services to ensure that, wherever possible, the maximum amount of medical information is input into the system and into the journey for an individual client at the very earliest stage.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time for today.

Mr McCarthy: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Given that we have no further business to conduct today, would it not be reasonable to request that the Minister be allowed to continue answering questions, because there are two very important questions still on the list.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Question Time is up.

Private Members' Business

Fishing: Aid Package

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly welcomes the efforts made by fishermen in meeting EU catch regulations in respect of cod and in reducing other unwanted catches; recognises the expense incurred in purchasing highly selective gears and forgoing valuable catches as a result of using these gears; sympathises with those fishermen whose earnings have been dramatically reduced because of a combination of bad weather and using new fishing gears; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to deliver urgently a meaningful package of aid designed to assist those fishermen who have helped her comply with the commitments she made at the EU Fisheries Council in December 2011. — [Mr Frew.]

Mr Irwin: My constituency does not have a natural affiliation with the sea, and I am someone who is much more at home with his feet on the green grassy slopes of Newry and Armagh. However, I have empathy with our fishermen in Northern Ireland, who, like our farmers, are not only at the mercy of the weather but are also at the mercy of the European Union and its increasingly restrictive laws and directives.

The task of getting the fresh fish we all enjoy from the depths of the sea to our dinner plate involves a significant operation, with the most risky element of the supply chain involving dedicated fishing crews taking to the high seas to land various sorts of sea life for our food industry. The fact that our fishermen are exposed to significant risk is in itself worthy of admiration. However, when you mix in the restraints placed on our fishermen in terms of days at sea and catch quotas and the significant issues with the weather of late, you begin to realise just how difficult fishing has become around our waters.

The EU common fisheries policy has been no friend to our fleet in Northern Ireland. I support the view that the regulating and managing powers of the EU in that regard should be handed to member states to administer, as that would allow a region to respond to the realities of fishing in its waters and take into account the specific marine environment stocks and the condition of the fish that our fleets catch.

As with many other areas of food production, the EU continues to make life difficult for Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. I could speak about the poor directives from Europe that have cost our poultry sector, our pork industry and other sectors, whereby the failure of other member states to implement directives has resulted in the unacceptable situation where our industries have spent money to adapt and ended up being undercut by products from countries with much lower standards.

The Anglo North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation has consistently lobbied the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister to offer a financial package to the fleet. That would go some way to sustaining the fishing industry in Northern Ireland following months of hardship. The pressures on the industry here have been intensifying rapidly. The goodwill of our fishermen has been tested to breaking point. In respect of developing fishing gear to reduce unwanted catches, as Michelle O'Neill has requested, seven options have been identified. Pursuit of those modifications has resulted not just in expenditure on developing the gear but a loss of catch and a significant loss of earnings.

Figures for the industry for the first half of 2013 compared with the first half of 2012 make for very concerning reading. That is why this motion has been brought before the House today. The value of the catch of local trawlers from January to June has dropped by 40% compared with the same six-month period last year. The fleet is now halfway through one of the most productive months of the fishing calendar. However, prospects have not improved, which, understandably, has left many disheartened.

I will refer to the comments of some Members who spoke in the debate. Mr Frew said that the industry has invested very heavily to comply with Europe. He believes that, if fishermen were given support, the industry would have a very bright future. Mr Hazzard commented that the fishing industry already receives support but said that it is possible that more could be done. Mrs Dobson referred to the reform of the EU cod recovery plan and the new flexibilities included in that. The House will be delighted to know that it was, of course, the DUP's Diane Dodds who delivered that reform. Mr McCarthy said that the industry had been in decline for many years and that every effort must be made to stop that decline.

Michelle McIlveen, following on from her Adjournment topic last week, said that she has spoken to fishermen and that they are

despondent. She said that the bad weather had had a big impact and that a hardship payment would help fishermen through this difficult time. Michelle also welcomed the Minister's acknowledgement of the suggestion that a task force meets the banking sector. I look forward to that meeting taking place.

Joe Byrne said that the big issues are quotas and days at sea. He felt that there is a need for the Department to develop forward planning. Mike Nesbitt said that fishermen work very hard. He actually said that he gets it much easier than fishermen, which is very interesting. Jim Allister commented how dangerous the job is and said that fishermen have been taken for granted. He also stated that the common fisheries policy had been a disaster for the industry.

The wife of a fisherman from Portavogie put the following on her Facebook page:

"Yeah, have to laugh. The most productive part of the fishing year ahead. How much exactly does she think the men will earn in the three months from now until the end of the September? God forbid this year is like last year. The weather will turn again come September. A year's salary in three months? Yeah, right."

Does the Minister understand the reality of the situation? When did the Minister last speak to fishermen about the industry and how they feel it is going?

Mrs O'Neill: Will the Member give way?

Mr Irwin: I will.

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure the Member that I regularly engage with fishermen and that I correspond with them in writing, by e-mail and in person.

Mr Irwin: The Minister told the House today that she will keep the situation under review. Many in the industry will see that as a fudge. Those in the industry who are suffering want action. Saying that there will be a review is putting it off until another day. If there is going to be a review, the Minister must conduct it immediately.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I understand what the Minister has said. However, when I ask the Minister about the fishing fleet and the assistance that she can give to it, it takes her more than the 10 years — sorry; the 10 days — allocated to answer those

questions for written answer. It sometimes feels like 10 years. I believe that the Minister is turning her face away from fishing.

Mr Irwin: I agree with the Member.

In 2008-09, a financial package for the industry helped it through that period. Since that, the industry has managed very well, but it has hit a real bad spot at this time. I, and many of us here, believe that if some assistance was given to the industry at this time, it would have a bright future. We call on the Minister to not only act on a review but to act immediately and give some help to the fishermen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the efforts made by fishermen in meeting EU catch regulations in respect of cod and in reducing other unwanted catches; recognises the expense incurred in purchasing highly selective gears and forgoing valuable catches as a result of using these gears; sympathises with those fishermen whose earnings have been dramatically reduced because of a combination of bad weather and using new fishing gears; and calls on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to deliver urgently a meaningful package of aid designed to assist those fishermen who have helped her comply with the commitments she made at the EU Fisheries Council in December 2011.

Adjourned at 3.41 pm.



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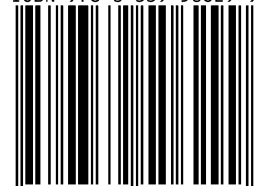
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