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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 27 November 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council:
Agriculture

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the seventeenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in agriculture sectoral format, which was held in Armagh on Wednesday 31 October.

The Executive were represented by Minister Jonathan Bell MLA and me. The Irish Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and Phil Hogan TD, the Minister for the Environment, Community and Local Government. I chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed with Minister Bell, and I am making it on behalf of both of us.

Ministers discussed the measures that were being taken in their respective jurisdictions to deal with the outbreak of ash dieback and agreed to maintain contact to facilitate a co-ordinated approach to the problem. We also exchanged views on farm safety and expressed our sympathies to the bereaved families following recent tragic incidents.

The Council discussed and noted the most recent developments with regard to negotiations on CAP reform and the next steps in the reform process, including that negotiations will continue at technical and political levels between the European Council and the European Parliament. As the negotiations progress, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine officials will continue to monitor developments and maintain close contact.

We agreed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for protecting the island of Ireland from

exotic animal disease incursion. The MOU underlines the commitment to key principles in the all-island animal health and welfare strategy. It sets out the principles to be followed throughout the island to help to prevent the entry and spread of exotic animal diseases through either jurisdiction and to provide assurance regarding the controls applied throughout the island.

The Council welcomed an update on the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan since the last agriculture sectoral meeting. The achievements included getting Aujeszky's disease-free status throughout the island of Ireland, which will obviously open us up further to export opportunities for the pig sector; the ongoing co-operation between officials on industry-led initiatives on production diseases that are not subject to control programmes, such as bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD); the setting up of an industry-led organisation Animal Health and Welfare NI, which will take forward initiatives to deal with such diseases; and agreement on reciprocal arrangements between industry bodies, North and South, which was signed by Animal Health Ireland and Animal Health and Welfare NI.

We also welcomed progress on the INTERREG IVa funding for strategic cross-border rural development projects, including the launch of the Regeneration in Villages, Emergency Rescue and Social Farming Across Borders projects. It was agreed that DARD, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government and their respective rural networks would organise an event to specifically encourage further co-operation between local action groups on a North/South basis.

The Council also agreed that Department officials would engage to identify common priority issues that could be addressed on a cross-border basis through European territorial co-operation programmes and that the steering committee for cross-border rural development would collaborate to propose a mechanism for

the co-ordination and targeting of support for cross-border areas.

The meeting concluded with Ministers noting the forthcoming EU presidency in the first half of the new year. The date of the next sectoral meeting is June 2013. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I welcome the statement and the Minister's comments. The statement refers to a co-ordinated approach to ash dieback. The Committee agreed the emergency legislation that is now in place. Will the Minister outline whether the co-ordinated approach goes beyond the legislative processes? What implements or tools are being used apart from the emergency legislation?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, ash dieback is a very serious disease with devastating consequences. The Chairperson is aware of that. I was grateful for the Committee's support for the emergency legislation that we brought forward. It is very important that we apply the fortress Ireland approach when dealing with disease outbreaks, whether in plant health or animal health. In this instance, we have co-ordinated our legislation on both occasions. I am also regularly in contact with Shane McEntee TD, who is the Minister responsible for that area of work. We are in contact every other day by phone, and officials are continuing engagement — they actually have another meeting this evening. It is very important that we continue to work together.

By way of an update, five recently planted ash premises in counties Antrim, Down and Derry were confirmed cases. A number of other sites are being followed up as part of the trace exercise. To date, we have destroyed around 4,500 ash saplings, which shows the scale of the work that we are involved in. As part of the trace forward exercise, a further six premises have been confirmed as having the fungus. That brings the total number of confirmed positive premises to 11 across counties Antrim, Down and Derry. I stress that these are all recently planted and relatively young sites. We will continue that engagement and continue to operate the fortress Ireland approach. We will also continue to engage with our colleagues in Britain because they are in a far worse situation than we currently are. We will have to continue all of that co-ordination as we make our way through the disease path and see how it develops.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her statement. I congratulate her and her officials on helping to get Aujeszky's disease clearance here, which will really help the beleaguered pig industry. Will the Minister update us on the present situation with the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in the statement, we welcomed a lot more progress on the all-island animal health and welfare plan. The Aujeszky's-free status was obviously a very welcome development. We have also had a lot of progress on BVD, and we are looking at tackling production diseases.

The all-island animal health and welfare strategy is bringing us to a place where we are able to seek agreement with Europe on free movement and trade right across the island. These are all very positive developments that we will continue to monitor and provide updates on. A lot of positive work is ongoing. It is important that we encourage and nurture that work and continue to drive it forward because, as I said, the endgame will be the free movement of animals right across the island, which opens up a lot more trade opportunities for all those involved in production.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you referred in your statement to a memorandum of understanding for an:

"All-Island Animal Health and Welfare Strategy."

Following on from yesterday's debate and the fact that the Republic of Ireland is TB free, did you have any discussions about TB when you discussed that all-island animal health and welfare strategy?

Mrs O'Neill: That issue regularly comes up at NSMC meetings. As I said yesterday, the South is, fortunately, in a different position. However, it was able to reach that point without legal challenge. Any measures that we take will have to have a sound evidence base, and we have to be able to withstand any legal challenge. As I said, that issue is regularly discussed, and we regularly engage and share information on it at a ministerial and an official level.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement. I note, in particular, the reference to animal diseases and the pig sector. Was the future of the Vion factory in Cookstown discussed, given

its particular strategic interest in Northern Ireland to the export of pig meat and bacon?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. The NSMC meeting was held before last week's announcement on the Vion factory. By way of an update, I have spoken to the managing director of Vion, who has assured me that the jobs in the Cookstown plant are secure. That was obviously a matter of concern for the people who work for that company.

During my recent visit to China, I raised with the Shanghai Ministry of Agriculture the potential trade barriers that exist for companies such as Vion. Indeed, I mentioned Vion in particular. It has agreed to a further exchange of information in that area to see whether we can address those barriers. That is a particular problem for companies such as Vion, which cannot buy pigs in, for example, Monaghan or Cavan and sell them to China, as the animals have to be reared and slaughtered in the same area. Those are the barriers that we need to remove. I will be grateful for the opportunity to meet with the director of trade and economics from the Shanghai Municipal Agricultural Commission, who is visiting Ireland in December. I will be able to explore that issue further at that time.

I think that there is a lot of potential in that area for us to move forward. Shanghai can produce only 25% of the pork that it needs, so it needs to import the other 75%. We want to be part of that trade, which has potential for our local industry.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the outbreak of ash dieback disease. The Agriculture Committee had a presentation from officials from the Minister's Department at its meeting last week. There will be financial repercussions for a number of private operators as a result of that disease. Was there any discussion at the NSMC meeting about possible compensation for those who have suffered or who will suffer as a result of that disease?

Mrs O'Neill: Compensation was not discussed. As I said in an earlier answer, this is obviously a very serious disease, and, at the moment, we are very much involved in a process of eradication. We are fortunate in that, to date, the sites where the disease has been confirmed have trees that all come from one import. If that remains the case, it will be very good. However, at this stage I cannot say whether that will be the case.

I am not concerned with compensation at the moment. I am concerned with eradicating the disease and making sure that we apply the fortress Ireland approach, keep the disease out and minimise the impact that it has on the industry. From the presentations that were made to the Agriculture Committee, you will be aware of the devastating impact that the disease will have not just for people who are involved in forestry and planting but for the hurling industry, for example.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, Minister. Minister, I note that your statement referred to the CAP reform, and it also referred to the forthcoming Irish presidency of the EU. Will the Minister advise us whether she thinks the forthcoming Irish presidency of the EU will be a positive development, particularly for the negotiations on the CAP reform? Is she working with the Irish Government to take an island-wide approach to those negotiations?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. Absolutely; we are very much going to Europe with a team Ireland approach, and we are talking to our 15 Irish MEPs and Minister Simon Coveney. The fact that the Irish Government have the presidency of the EU for the first six months of next year will obviously be a very good opportunity for us to make sure that we feed in our views very strongly.

10.45 am

The Taoiseach offered to have officials from here come in and be part of their work team during the term of the presidency, which we welcome.

Unfortunately, last week there was a failure to reach financial agreement. Therefore, the likelihood of being able to do a deal in the first six months of next year, when the Dublin Government have the presidency, is looking a lot more bleak.

We will continue to monitor the situation. We hope that there will be some efforts to reach an agreement, because without the financial framework being agreed, there is no chance of movement on the details around greening, the definition of "active farmer" and all the other issues that we are dealing with. However, I assure the Member that we have a strong relationship with the Dublin Government in ensuring that we push a team Ireland approach, because, at the end of the day, we have many areas of common interest. We differ little on the detail of CAP reform, so we will continue to do more.

Mr Rogers: My thanks to the Minister for her statement. I particularly welcome her comments on cross-border initiatives. Are there any opportunities for Louth and south Down to work together on social farming and village renewal for places such as Greencastle and Rostrevor?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. I was at the launch of the social farming project, which I must tell the Member is fantastic. People who may have mental health problems can go out and work on a farm, and for them to be out working away in the fresh air is very therapeutic. I heard some fantastic examples of that, and I would like to see more of that rolled out.

The project is in its early stages, and we will continue to monitor it, but I think that everybody, including the health service, should look to social farming's therapeutic potential. It is also fantastic for farmers to be able to open up their farm to people, take them in and give them the opportunity to work. I want to see a lot more of that work happening. We agreed to scope the potential for a lot more collaborative working and to look at how we can exploit EU funds for the border counties. I will be happy to report back to the Member on further discussions and developments.

Mr Allister: The Ministers discussed CAP reform. Since the EU Budget dictates the shape and the extent of CAP, what view did the Northern Ireland delegation express as to the adequacy of the EU Budget? What is the Executive's stance on the need to reduce the EU Budget? Do the Executive think that the Commission's extravagant proposals are worthy of support? Where do the Executive stand? Do they support our national Government's stand on cutting the EU Budget?

Mrs O'Neill: I certainly do not support the stand on cutting the EU Budget. I think that it is unfortunate that some DUP MPs voted at Westminster with the British Treasury position to cut the CAP budget. Even freezing the EU Budget in real terms is not a good position to adopt. It was perhaps the best position from which to start, but last week's discussions are a worrying development. If we see any further cuts to the overall EU Budget, where will those cuts leave our farmers? Therefore, cutting the EU Budget is something that we will continue to resist.

We have always said that we have had an inadequate share of pillar 2 support, so we need to continue to push for an increased

share. The impact that a cut will have, not to mention the difficult climate faced by our farmers, means that it is unfortunate that some parties have taken the stance of voting for a reduction in the overall CAP budget.

My position is clear: I do not support a reduction in the CAP budget. I will continue to fight for a strong and adequate budget. That is the position that I take in Europe and with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). I have been successful in convincing the agriculture commission to leave the budget discussions aside and let us deal with the agricultural issues. However, when it comes to discussions with DEFRA and the British Treasury, we need to fight strongly for our local farmers, and I encourage all parties to look again at their position and get on board with that.

Executive Committee Business

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill (NIA 16/11-15) be agreed.

The Bill amends the Water and Sewerage Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 in order to extend by three years the period in which my Department will pay a subsidy to NI Water (NIW) in lieu of household water charges. Were the amendment not to be made, the existing legislative basis for paying that subsidy would expire at the end of the current financial year. Members will be aware that the Executive have given a commitment in the Programme for Government 2011-15 not to introduce any additional household water charges. Members will also be aware that this was voted for in the Assembly and was supported by all parties in the Executive. The Bill will implement that commitment and ensure financial stability for NI Water.

I am aware that the Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee, Mr Spratt, is not in his usual place this morning. On behalf of myself and the entire House, I wish Mr Spratt a very speedy and full recovery, and hope that he can resume his rightful place in the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

I appreciate that there are wider questions about the future funding and governance arrangements for water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. Given the Executive's commitment, I put a paper to Executive colleagues to assess the implications of the commitment in the Programme for Government, which the Executive recently agreed. However, the Bill places no constraint on a broad debate on the long-term governance of NI Water, nor does it need to await resolution of those issues. It simply implements the Executive's agreed existing commitment.

The Bill will make a further technical amendment to the Land Registration Act (Northern Ireland) 1970. The effect will be to cause a water and sewerage undertaker's notification to lay certain pipes and sewers on private land to be registered at Land Registers NI. This will make that information publicly

available, particularly, and importantly, to prospective property purchasers.

This is a short Bill, and I think that the rationale is understood by all. Indeed, it makes good a commitment by all. With that background, I may expect a surge of support that may lead to a high watermark for the Assembly.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Labhraim inniu mar LeasChathaoirleach an Choiste Forbartha Réigiúnaí. I speak today as the Deputy Chairperson of the Regional Development Committee. First, I echo what the Minister said in relation to the Chairperson, Jimmy. On behalf of the Committee, I send him our best wishes and hope for his speedy return as Chairperson.

The Committee received a presentation on the proposed Bill at its meeting of 21 November 2012. The Committee is agreed that the scope of the Bill is narrow, and does not intend revisiting the question as to whether there should or should not be water charges, although members may wish to do so in their capacity as individual members. The Committee accepts, as the Minister indicated, that it was an Executive decision to extend the period of subsidy payments to NI Water rather than introduce household water charges. On that basis, the Committee looks forward to receiving the Bill in Committee Stage and will endeavour to co-operate with the Minister and his officials to ensure that it passes through the Assembly procedures in a timely manner.

However, I wish to use this opportunity to again advise the Minister of the Committee's concern about the governance of NIW, particularly as we seek to extend the period of subsidy. As the Minister will appreciate, NIW was established as a Go-co but is also classified as a non-departmental public body, attaching it to the departmental accounting processes. This classification severely restricts the strategic direction of the company and its ability to plan long-term investment programmes. The Committee is aware that the Minister will soon present a paper to his colleagues in the Executive on governance within NIW and calls on that to be progressed as urgently as is practicable.

As I indicated, the Committee for Regional Development looks forward to receiving the Bill in Committee Stage. Go raibh míle maith agat.

Mr Easton: I welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. In my constituency, I have been contacted

by a large number of people who are concerned about the impact of possible water charges, which will affect their already stretched budgets if introduced next year. Many people have expressed concerns to me that their finances will be stretched to breaking point as they struggle to ensure that they have the basics, such as water, heat, shelter and housing, if such charges were to be introduced. I feel that, by stopping their introduction for three years until 2016, we can ease the worry for our constituents and ensure that, in a time of economic pressures for families, the working poor and other vulnerable groups such as those on fixed incomes, they will not be subject to undue financial pressure and stress from this source.

Although this move will cost the Assembly £282 million in subsidies, I feel that, when weighed up against the potential suffering of those in society who can least afford it, the benefits outweigh the costs.

I also welcome clause 2, which is a minor technicality that allows water and sewerage undertakers to record their intention to carry out certain works on private land on the statutory charge register, which is held by Land Registry. This clause will allow potential buyers of land to be informed if the land is affected by certain statutory restrictions. This is a worthwhile clause to help protect people when purchasing land. I support the Bill.

Mr Kinahan: I also wish Jimmy all the best. I stand here in place of my colleague, Ross Hussey, who is unavoidably absent from today's debate. However, from one Ulster Unionist to another, I would like to warmly welcome the Bill, and I congratulate the Minister and my party colleague, Danny Kennedy, for introducing yet another Ulster Unionist commitment; one which, again, will greatly benefit the people of Northern Ireland.

If only all the business that came through the House was as concise as this, I am sure that we would get through an awful lot more than we do at present. Nevertheless, just because the Bill is modest in length does not mean that its consequences are any less significant. This Bill will protect households up and down the country from charges which they, quite rightly, will feel that they have no reason to be paying.

My party's official position on water charges, now and for a number of elections, has been that we recognise the difficulties around the current arrangement and we accept the overall unsustainability of the situation. However, we also recognise that this is not the time to bring

in universal water charges — charges that would apply equally to those who are most vulnerable in society as it would to those who are most able to pay.

We must also remember that we already pay for a considerable element of our water and sewerage services through the domestic regional rate each year. This accounts for an average £160 per household. Therefore, people who claim that households here are getting free water are not actually correct.

Although I support the Bill, which will maintain the status quo until March 2016, that does not mean to say that my party would not be open to an all-encompassing review that brings into consideration charges that people are already paying.

Northern Ireland Water and every respective Regional Development Minister to date have inherited a problem of chronic underinvestment in our water infrastructure over a period spanning decades. Therefore, some parties in this Chamber may hold even more of the responsibility than others for our poor infrastructure.

Nevertheless, it is vital that Northern Ireland Water does not become complacent with the money that it is getting through the subsidy. It must remain conscious of the fact that there are things that it could and should be doing better. Northern Ireland Water must, and I expect that it does, acknowledge that it is responsible for too many water pollution incidents across the Province. There are other issues, such as the ongoing problem of leaks in supply pipes. Although the Bill may not directly relate to such issues, it will, inevitably, feed into a wider discussion.

Although the detractors, no doubt to my right, may criticise the Bill, I look forward to hearing how they would justify putting such a new charge on people in the current economic climate. I remind them of a commitment in the Programme for Government — a document which, of course, we know they sold their purported principles to be part of — which was that households will endure no additional water charges during this Programme for Government term. The Alliance Party signed up to the Programme for Government, did it not?

Although it may not be ideal, we will continue to support the current situation of Northern Ireland Water being awarded adequate funding through the annual subsidy within the memorandum of understanding, based on whatever the Utility Regulator recommends.

It is a short-term fix for a long-term problem, but it remains clear to me that, at this moment in time, it is the best way to proceed.

In conclusion, I congratulate Danny Kennedy once again on introducing a policy that is reflective of the pressures that people find themselves under. Maybe other choices will have to be made in the future, but, for right now, one thing is for sure: no Ulster Unionist Minister will be forcing water charges on anyone. I support the Bill.

11.00 am

Mr Dallat: I preface my remarks by extending our good wishes to Jimmy Spratt, the Chairperson of the Committee. We look forward to having Jimmy back very soon to resume the important role that he plays in the Committee's work.

The Minister is right to expect a deluge of support this morning. I was deeply touched by the modesty of his party colleague Danny Kinahan, who never misses a political opportunity. Anyone suggesting the introduction of water charges in the present economic climate would be behaving rather like a turkey voting for Christmas. It is certainly not on. I am not sure if Danny was indicating that he will not run for election after 2016 by suggesting that there might be water charges then.

We, in the SDLP, certainly believe that there are more intelligent ways of managing the water service than separate water charges. Having said that, I think that it is important to emphasise that the fact that there will be no separate water charges for the next few years does not mean that we should, in any way, give up on our determination to ensure that the water delivered to our homes and industries is of the highest quality and, equally, that the infrastructure that carries sewage to the disposal plants is continually upgraded and improved. We are a tourist region, and it is important that our beaches continue to have blue flags and are not contaminated by raw sewage.

There is, of course, another aspect, namely our need to comply with European regulations and the fear of infraction. I am particularly aware that, in rural areas, there are many small sewage works that are no longer fit for purpose. They need to be either replaced or connected to major projects to give people in rural areas the same rights as people in urban areas and to manifestly give our support to the environment.

Other issues have been referred to. Members know that Northern Ireland Water has not had a happy history in recent years. Let us hope that that is all water under the bridge. I know that the Minister takes this very seriously, and I am not about to attack him in any way for his endeavours. However, we must constantly assess and review the governance of Northern Ireland Water and ensure that it is fit for purpose, compares in every way with modern water services anywhere in the world and is prepared for the kind of emergencies that are happening in England and Wales at the moment. Good luck to those people. We have had samples of such things in Northern Ireland. We must have a water service that is able to cope with such emergencies and have in place the procedures, machinery and mechanisms to deal with them. It is only two years since the freeze, when Northern Ireland Water virtually collapsed in its duty and responsibility to deliver water to the homes of our people, particularly the elderly, the vulnerable and families with children. Those issues will continue to be priorities for the Assembly. I am sure that no Member would suggest that those priorities should diminish in some way because we do not have separate water charges.

The Bill also allows for work to be carried out on private property. That will appear in a statutory register. That is important. When the Water Service moves onto private property, it must endeavour to ensure that it leaves the place as it was found. A failure to do so has been a complaint in the past.

Otherwise, like everyone else in the Assembly, I totally support the Bill.

Mr Dickson: I also wish the Chair of our Committee, Jim Spratt, well.

I support the Bill. That might be a surprise to some who have already spoken. The detailed scrutiny will begin soon at the Committee Stage. However, the Alliance Party has some concerns. We respect the fact that the Assembly and the Executive have agreed a Programme for Government that rules out the introduction of domestic water charges through to April 2015. Nevertheless, we think that that approach must be reconsidered for the immediate post-2015 period, and so we question the wisdom of legislation that defers water charges until as far away as 2016. Indeed, there is a strong case for the introduction of water charges. Those who wish to stick their head in the sand are free to do so, but some of us are realists.

The current subsidy diverts millions of pounds from other essential services, such as schools and hospitals, which affects the most vulnerable in our society disproportionately. It also limits investment in our water and sewerage infrastructure. That is key to this debate, and it cannot be separated from the recent flooding, which has highlighted the need for additional funding. The discussion should therefore be focused on the nature of a future charging regime to ensure that it is fair and linked to the ability to pay. A system of fair charging would ensure that services did not suffer and the most vulnerable did not have to foot the bill.

There is also an issue regarding the future of the governance of Northern Ireland Water. The Go-co model has essentially been defaulted to an NDPB and is not self-financing. Indeed, experts have warned that extra costs are incurred due to the accounting treatment under those arrangements. Moreover, the current governance arrangements do not afford maximum management flexibility to plan for future improvements. Management of a water system should be a long-term and strategic planning process. Our current charging system allows only year-on-year planning. We need to allow for managing our water service for 25 to 30 years in advance instead of in one-year periods.

At a conference in April, representatives of Scottish Water explained how their company's governance model, facilitated by separate charging systems, allowed for long-term strategic planning, and they detailed the many benefits that that brings. It is clear that the management of Northern Ireland Water desires the same freedom to plan ahead, but our current model results from the refusal of most parties to face up to the necessity of charging and makes the financial arrangements totally inflexible. How is Northern Ireland Water meant to plan ahead when it depends on a subsidy payment that may vary and has to be spent within one year? A steady and more reliable funding source would allow Northern Ireland Water to borrow on favourable terms and provide additional revenue for investment in the infrastructure. We need a model that is majority self-financing, with charging that is fair and based on the ability to pay. Only then will Northern Ireland Water have the financial flexibility needed to plan ahead to deal with floods and leaks, invest in much needed new infrastructure and deal with pollution. That will deliver for Northern Ireland the world-class water service that we desire and Northern Ireland deserves.

The Bill is, regrettably, short-sighted in that it defers charging to a future date but contains no provision for the immediate period thereafter. We have an opportunity to plan ahead post 2015, which is particularly important given the significant lead-in time for any change to charging. That is an opportunity that we should not cast aside. We should grasp the opportunity, lest we spiral into further years of deferral and neglect of our water system.

Mr McNarry: I am sure that the best wishes of the House will be conveyed to our Chairman, Jimmy Spratt, and I add my good wishes to those that have been genuinely made. It is also nice to hear the party that was busting last week to go into opposition demonstrate how convenient it is to have an Executive Minister in place today.

This is a welcome amendment Bill, which will, in the short term, give cover and financial easement to many households and consumers. Of course, it also illustrates that a looming, unsuspected hardship could be forced on to the family bill in a few years' time. Clearly, the long-term issue of the potential spiralling of water and sewerage costs and, indeed, the unfair proportionality of such costs is far from being settled. The Minister's message is popular today, but what will be the Minister of the day's conclusion in 2016? Some may well wallow in this good news announcement, but this question remains: is this a "live today, pay tomorrow" Bill? It looks increasingly like it, in which case some may say that they do not know what the water situation will be in four years' time. I say that the withdrawal from the Budget to pay for water in four years' time should have been calculated already, and we should at least have a projection of how much water will cost either the taxpayer or the bill payer in 2016. It will certainly not cost less, so how much more will it cost?

Is it not the case that the longer the taxpayer's money is used to prioritise and support the water subsidy, the less Northern Ireland Water will feel any pressure or compulsion to reduce its costs by increasing its efficiencies? With the relaxation equated to the Bill, which is how it is equated, why would the company exert itself to perform better and be more cost-effective when it gets money handed to it for performing inefficiently? The fact that the public pay for water means that no one is fooled by this subsidy extension, and the public are concerned with the question not of if but of when direct charges will be pressed on them in the form of a water bill. When those charges come, how cost-effective will they be, given that we have been operating an inefficient subsidy

for an inefficient company? Will those charges in that form or even in their current disguised taxation form be value for money? I think that the public demand to know from us whether we are getting the best economies of scale from Northern Ireland Water and whether its charges are competitive.

It seems that that performance is now being challenged. The facts are that the company feels immune to pressure, and it admits that neither the Minister nor the departmental officials are engaged in the wrangle between the company and the regulator. They are out of the picture. That worries me, because I then wonder, "If the company is at war with the regulator and the regulator's facts and figures prove correct, at what stage will this or the next Assembly be told who has won the war between the company and the regulator?". I know that, in two to three weeks' time, we will know what efficiencies the regulator wants, because he will have finalised his determination. The question is this: will the Minister back him? We hear the company say that the regulator's draft determination is undeliverable. The next question is this: will the Minister back the company? Yes; both are correct, assuming that an extended time for continuing the subsidy will be adopted. So, when is the crunch on the unsuspecting paying public? Where will Northern Ireland Water, the regulator, the Department and the public be when the dispute over efficiencies, based as it is in the comfort zone of an overgenerous subsidy, is resolved, only to then move us into another phase preparing for 2016? Where are we now, and where will we be then? Will the water subsidy be sustained after 2016 and for how long? Is the amendment in the Bill set at a rigid subsidy figure until 2016? Should the regulator succeed in his arguments over efficiencies, what impact will that have on Northern Ireland Water's performances? As I suspect, after the Bill has been enacted, when the company knocks on the Minister's door wanting more money, how can he refuse it? Will he refuse it?

11.15 am

The key element that legislation brought to the House should contain is forward thinking. We need to meet and regulate the situations most likely to arise in the next few years so that the legislation that we pass is fit for purpose and we do not find ourselves having to regulate the system all over again. Effectively, the Bill means extending the multimillion-pound subsidy to Northern Ireland Water until March 2016 while freezing charges for domestic water usage. A serious number of issues arise that

are not being addressed in the Bill, and it seems that they are not even being considered for the future. It is clear that the ratepayer will continue to pay for water, either through subsidies or rates or, as it is, through both. To my mind, the issues that are not being addressed concern what happens after March 2016. Will the ratepayer's contribution be increased over the next three years? Conversely, will the subsidy be increased?

Compounding those unanswered issues is a report due from the Utility Regulator on 14 December detailing his final determination, following his draft determination on PC13. The Utility Regulator is insisting on Northern Ireland Water meeting efficiency targets. For its part, Northern Ireland Water contends that those efficiency targets are undeliverable and that 76% of its revenue comes from public expenditure. That has resulted in Northern Ireland Water being reclassified as a non-departmental public body. That is where it sits. "Undeliverable", it says; "We can't do it", it says. It says that it will not enter into the argument on deliverability or extension. By extension, it says that it cannot therefore meet the efficiency targets likely to be imposed on it by the regulator. What is the point of a regulator if companies do not enter into the discussion? The bottom line is that, should the company and the regulator end up in stalemate, which looks to be the case, the issue will end up with something like the competition body.

This kind of Mexican stand-off is no way to do business and no way of using public money. It seems clear to me that ratepayers and taxpayers, as people, are fed up listening to highly paid company executives tell them that they cannot run the business and it cannot be sustained without inflated subsidies from public money. It is a cry that we hear too often in the House from people who are not answerable to the House. It seems that Northern Ireland Water cannot perform adequately within the regulator's definition of "proposed efficiency levels".

I do not know, because no one in the Northern Ireland Water company can tell me, whether, in this amendment Bill, domestic rates will be increased with respect to water charges or whether the multimillion-pound subsidy, paid for out of our taxes, will be increased to offset them. No one is detailing anything, except the purposes we know of. What I do know is what is not being addressed. Come 2016, a Stormont Executive could well find themselves in the position of launching a water charge Exocet at the heretofore unsuspecting public of Northern Ireland.

Popularity is fine, but it is no substitute for good government. By pushing aside a decision on the long-term financing of Northern Ireland Water, the Bill does not serve the public well. The public may be content, for now, to go along with the Bill, as they are content with so many other fictions. However, ultimately, Members must think about whether the Bill is in the public interest. Public finance, I contend, is always better when it is planned and when action is not forced on us by one crisis or another.

So, I believe that, in line with the Bill and as we take it through the various stages, the public will demand answers, because they will want to know the details on water charges. After all, we are paying for them. We all welcome the Bill, because that is the route that we have taken with it. Contained in the Bill are the pledges that most if not all of us have given to the electorate, which is that there will be no water charges. This extension is to 2016. The error that is now being made and what we need to know, as the Bill goes through the House and the Committee, is where it will take us to in 2016 with this extension. There is a real possibility in my mind and in the mind of many economists that water charges will be introduced and will plunge some people into poverty. That is the human end of the equation.

Austerity has kicked in on many other fronts. Benefits are being reassessed on an ongoing basis, and unemployment remains stubbornly high, in stark contrast to the rest of the United Kingdom. People may well have the good feeling of Christmas, overspend and choose to pay later. Imagine if, on top of all that spending and the feel-good factor of Christmas — not this Christmas, not the next but maybe the following Christmas — a whopping great bill for water charges eventually drops through the letter box. That may be where we are heading.

So, what do we do? The reality is that there is no escape route to prevent the charges. That is what the Bill says. What is the cost of the extension that the Minister asks for? What are the public paying for and, in doing so, what options are open to them? What is likely to be more popular: being taxed for payment, as is the case, or receiving a bill, which is the additional method of payment through the domestic rate that it does not produce?

On the one hand, the water company is defiant in its stand over meeting what is likely to be the Utility Regulator's requirement for efficiencies. On the other hand, Minister Kennedy is pushing ahead with extending the subsidy on water. I do not fault him for that, but my concern is that the challenge of paying for water needs to be

faced. We cannot somehow store this for future consideration. I do not think that the Executive are keen on the idea of storing it or fudging it; I think that they do not know how to deal with it. They have attached themselves to something like a limpet, and they really do not know how to work this through. They do not know how to take away — if that is the case — and redirect the Bill, because the public are not fooled. They know that we pay for this in taxes, but nobody wants to give them a bill. What will be the difference? The difference will be that you get your bill but you will get no tax rebate. You can rest assured that that will be the case.

The earlier we deal with the problem, the easier it will be to deal with it. The challenge of paying for water needs to be thoroughly researched, and the public need to be engaged throughout that process. I trust that Minister Kennedy will proceed to initiate a process between now and 2016. If we come back or somebody comes back here three months before 2016 and says, "Let us talk about water", we will not be prepared, and we will not stand a chance. Sometimes the cynic may say, "Well, if only Peter Robinson would tell us when the election will be. Will it be in 2015 or 2016? How long do we need to keep an extension for water charges?". The answer is this: we all need to take it if we want to be popular, and we all need to keep it until after that election and then see what is doing it. Mark my words: you will be going in front of the electorate having to answer them about your position on the introduction of water charges or having the taxman — you and I and them — pay for it. Therefore, we need to know the proportion of the rates that goes towards water charges. What will it be in 2016? We need to know the amount of the subsidy paid for by taxpayers. We have an idea of it, but what will it be in 2016?

The Bill will continue its passage today. We will watch its process and progress until adoption. The question that I pose is this: what will the House do? Adopt it? Then what? I trust that the Minister will ensure that we leave this place today better informed.

Mr Allister: Like the Bill itself, I will be brief. I have just a couple of points that I invite the Minister to elaborate on.

Mr McNarry touched on the duration of the further extension of three years that is in the Bill. My mind turns to this issue: why three years? Even under the dreaded, dreadful direct rule, they managed to come up with an extension of six years for the avoidance of water charges. The Executive, through the Minister, have come up with an extension of a

further three years. Why is it three years? What is the logic, the thinking and the compulsion relating to three years? Is it simply that that takes us past or close to the next Assembly election? Is it because opposition to water charging is seen by all as a good campaigning issue and the Minister and others want to keep it as something that is there before the electorate so that politicians can beat their chest and say, "Vote for us and we will save you from water charges, because, if you do not, come the spring of 2016, you will be saddled with them"?

Is it as cynical as that in terms of timing? If we are more magnanimous and more thoughtful of the needs of our constituents than direct rule Ministers were, why are we putting up only 50% of the period that they guaranteed in the 2006 order to protect us from water charges? Perhaps the Minister could explain why he is reining this in in three years' time? What is the logic and thinking behind that? If the political consensus is against water charging, as it seems to be, and properly so, why is he not simply saying, "I am going to put this issue to bed for the foreseeable future, and I am going to say that there will be no water charging because we are going to have this mechanism for the foreseeable future, way beyond the next election." I am interested to know why that is not the thinking.

11.30 am

There have been some references to the operation of Northern Ireland Water, and Mr McNarry quite fully referred to issues about the efficiencies in NIW. I would press the Minister on how he thinks efficiencies in NIW are going. Does he think it is living up to expectations in these current financial circumstances? Is it doing what it ought to in respect of efficiencies? For example, something topical that was mentioned yesterday is the matter of the pension scheme in Northern Ireland Water. How is it progressing in bringing itself into line with the Hutton proposals? I ask that because we have the quite amazing situation in Northern Ireland Water in which senior executives have a pension scheme with a contribution of 26.9% of salary.

Mr Speaker: Order. As the Member will know, I allow some latitude, even at the Second Stage of a Bill, which is specifically about the principles of the Bill. This is a very narrow and focused Bill. I am listening to the Member very carefully, and I detect that he may be going slightly outside of the Second Stage of the Bill. Would I be correct in saying what I am saying?

Mr Allister: That would not be my perception, Mr Speaker. *[Laughter.]* The point I was making was that we are discussing a Bill in the context of the financing of Northern Ireland Water, so I think, as others have thought, that this is a legitimate question to raise: how are the efficiencies of Northern Ireland Water measuring up to what we would expect in the expending of public money? I am using by way of one illustration the amount of money that is, perhaps, squandered within the pension scheme. I am asking, in consequence, whether the Minister thinks that NIW is doing all it should in that specific regard as an example of what the public expectation would be in respect of efficiencies?

I think Northern Ireland Water's credibility has suffered considerably over recent times, and the appointment and non-appointment of chairmen is something that, naturally, has stirred up a lot of controversy. To add to that by discovering that it is far from efficient and very generous to itself with, for example, its pension scheme is a problem that further strains its credibility. I hope that the Minister is able to reassure us on the efficiency drive within Northern Ireland Water.

With regard to clause 2, I think it is right and proper that such matters should be registered with Land Registry, so that the unsuspecting purchaser can, undoubtedly, see what it is he is buying and is not taken by surprise with plans for the laying of pipes, etc, on land that he might be considering purchasing. I think that that is a sensible proposition and one that will be of assistance in that regard, and I entirely support it. I support the general principles of the Bill, but I would like to hear the Minister answer some of those points, if he would.

Mr Kennedy: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate, particularly those members of the Regional Development Committee, including the Deputy Chairperson. I thank Members for the widespread support that they have shown for the Bill today. I am pleased to acknowledge that support, because it will ensure that the Executive's Programme for Government 2011-15 commitment not to introduce any additional household water charges is implemented.

Some have expressed perhaps misgivings or concerns that the Bill does not address long-term questions about the funding and governance arrangements for water and sewerage services in Northern Ireland. As I explained in my opening remarks, the Bill is not meant to deal with those broader issues of policy.

The current legislation, which enables a subsidy to be paid to Northern Ireland Water, will expire on 31 March 2013. If the Executive's decision not to introduce additional water charges is to be implemented, we need this new legislation. It is important to stress that the Bill does not constrain debate by the Executive, or indeed the Assembly, on the broader longer-term issues facing the water industry in Northern Ireland. It does, however, ensure that, until there is broad agreement on a sensible way forward, a proper mechanism to pay for water and sewerage services is in place.

There has been some comment about the proposal to require notices in respect of the laying of certain pipes and sewers on private land to be registered in the Statutory Charges Register. In my view, that is a common sense measure to make information about intended works by NI Water on private property publicly available on the NI Land Registry.

While there may be questions about the future of the water industry in Northern Ireland, there is no question, in my mind, that the legislation is the right thing to do now. It makes good a commitment not to introduce additional household water charges in the current Programme for Government (PFG) and provides space and opportunity for a mature, thoughtful and sensible future debate on options and approaches that may be taken in the next Assembly.

I will now comment on Members' contributions.

The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Lynch, joined me in my good wishes to Mr Spratt, as Members unanimously have done. We trust and pray that he is restored to full health as quickly as possible. We send good wishes to his wife Lynda and his family.

Mr Lynch welcomed the broad concepts of the Bill and indicated that the Committee would co-operate with myself and officials as we go forward. He did raise the issue of governance, but I can now tell him that the Executive paper on how we move forward, which I presented to colleagues, was agreed at the recent Executive meeting. That paper will now begin to be the subject of discussion at the Budget review group. I very much look forward to that. That will give all parties — certainly all Executive parties — the opportunity to contribute. I am sure that other Members will find ways of contributing, and the Committee may well find ways of contributing, as we move forward.

Mr Easton welcomed the PFG commitment being honoured.

Mr Kinahan had some very kind, and indeed true, comments of a personal note. I thought that his was an excellent contribution about the current situation. I assure him that the wider discussion will be helpful as we move forward. There are issues about governance, funding and infrastructure, and I very much hope that we can make early progress on them all.

Mr Dallat gave the Bill a broad welcome. His contribution included some very bad puns, but we are prepared to overlook those. He raised issues about the quality of water and the infrastructural improvements, which are important, and he also said that local wastewater treatment plants need to be upgraded. As the Member will know, there is a rolling programme for that, and some significant progress has been made, including in areas in his constituency. I very much agree with his assertion that Northern Ireland Water must be fit for purpose as we look to the future and that it has to be in a position to respond to the challenges that it faces.

Mr Beggs: Would the Minister care to comment on the implications for Northern Ireland Water following the Finance Minister's recent statement of 12 November, in which he indicated the Budget realignment for 2013-14 and the subsequent year? In particular, he commented that some Departments would have their funding reduced, and he specifically mentioned that the Department for Regional Development would have its funding reduced.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his contribution. I was, and am, concerned that the Minister of Finance proposed that there will be a reduction in the NIW revenue budget of £10 million in 2013-14 and 2014-15 before the regulatory process has run its course. However, I have no doubt that the Executive will wish to respect the outcome of that regulatory process. As water funding is a cross-cutting issue that directly affects the lives of all our citizens, all Ministers have a duty to ensure that those vital services are properly funded.

Mr Dickson promised a detailed scrutiny at Committee Stage. I was somewhat disappointed, because he started off positively but then referred to this as a "short-sighted" Bill. I remind him of a quotation from Sherlock Holmes:

"When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

That is the situation that I find myself in, and I want to see progress being made at the Budget review group.

We had a substantial contribution from Mr McNarry. In some ways, he and Mr Allister are not quite harbingers of doom or weeping Jeremiahs, but they certainly cast some concern about what is a straightforward Bill that is consistent with the Programme for Government and supported by the Executive as a whole.

Before I go into some of the detail of the issues that Mr McNarry in particular raised, I will say that it may represent a change of policy for UKIP, which Members will want to know about. He appeared to indicate that his party was at least looking at the prospect of water charges. That will conflict with the views of an existing UKIP representative in Northern Ireland, Councillor Henry Reilly, who strenuously attacked the Alliance Party for having the temerity to propose the introduction of water charges. So, whether that is the first sign of a split in UKIP, I do not know, but no doubt things will emerge in the future.

Mr McNarry: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: No, I have progress to make, and the Member made a substantial contribution.

Mr McNarry: So, you just want to say —

11.45 am

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

Mr Kennedy: The Member spoke about the subsidy to NI Water and the legislation that is before him. Lest there be any confusion, the subsidy that the Executive are providing is a customer subsidy. It is not a subsidy for NI Water. The subsidy means that households do not have to pay water charges; rather, the Executive pay them on their behalf. NI Water is regulated by an independent regulator. It sets the company challenging efficiency targets that are well above the public sector norm. In the past, NI Water has delivered such efficiencies.

Mr McNarry also asked what the cost of the Bill will be. The subsidy in 2012-13 is £282 million. Over the next two years, it will be of similar magnitude. NIW will remain majority-funded from public expenditure, so the Executive will continue to meet the majority of its costs. The Member will already know, as will other Members, that householders' current

contribution is around £160 for an average house through the regional rate. That covers less than half the costs of providing water and sewerage services. Non-domestic customers pay direct charges, which are partly subsidised.

Mr Allister asked why the subsidy is to be extended for three years. The reason is simply that it meets the Executive's commitment not to introduce water charges in the current budgetary period. Inevitably, a subsidy will be required in the following year. Beyond that, the Executive have yet to agree their position. The Member will know that it is not possible or, indeed, wise for the Executive or the Assembly to mandate Executives long into the future.

Those are most of the points that Members raised. If there are others that have not been addressed, I will, of course, study Hansard and correspond directly with individual Members. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill (NIA 16/11-15) be agreed.

Private Members' Business

Transport: EU Funding for 2014-2020

Mr Speaker: Two amendments have been selected, so up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, Members should note that if amendment No 1 is made, amendment No 2 cannot be made.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work in partnership with the Irish Government to advance the "pre-identified" projects list for inclusion in the next round of EU funding for 2014-2020.

I obviously support the motion, and I agree with both amendments. My two colleagues will speak in more detail on the amendments later.

In the past, European funding has paid dividends and brought advantages to the island of Ireland, particularly the South of Ireland. Only for that European funding, I do not think that the state would have been as competitive as it has been. I know that there has been a downturn in the economy there, but if people or states are to be ready when the economy comes back around, they need to deal with infrastructure across the region.

We know that the Trans-European Transport Network, known to most of us as TEN-T, sets out the policy framework for the development of transport infrastructure across the EU. TEN-T comprises infrastructure such as roads, railways, waterways, ports, airports, navigation aids and freight terminals across Europe. TEN-T has an EU budget of around €49 million for the 2007-2013 programme period. The next round of EU funding for 2014-2020 is currently being decided based on a list of pre-identified projects. However, Ireland does not feature on that list. It is important to identify funding now, as Ireland will assume the presidency in January, and we hope that a decision is made and agreed during that period.

As somebody who travelled to Brussels as part of the Committee for Regional Development, I know that — and other members can confirm this — there are those in Europe who have difficulty envisioning where Ireland is situated. They actually thought that we were connected to mainland Europe, so we had to take out a map and show them that the blue stripe represented water between us. Those rapporteurs are the ones who will make the decisions about the next tranche of funding.

Quite a bit of the large tranche of TEN-T moneys is earmarked for new eastern states of the European Union. They cover vast areas, and the EU wants to make them more competitive in a European context. The difficulty is that such decisions could result in Ireland becoming peripheral, particularly as we are the most westerly country on the flank of Europe. If European decision-makers take their eye off the ball and instead spend money on those new states, the island of Ireland could be left on the periphery and become less competitive in the new markets that will rise when the economy comes back around. That is one of the things that we are afraid may happen.

The island of Ireland needs to become a vital part of the new EU core transport network. That is why we are saying to the Minister that he should work innovatively and imaginatively with his counterparts in Dublin and push very hard so that we are not left out of decision-making when —

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that we should maximise the amount of EU funding available for projects? Does he also agree that the Irish Government have a good track record in that regard and that we could benefit from that?

Mr Lynch: I thank the Member for his intervention. I certainly agree with him. The Assembly, the Executive and Departments should maximise funding, particularly the Department for Regional Development (DRD), because it covers roads and transport networks.

I agree with the Member that the Southern Government have made huge advances in their networks in the Twenty-six Counties over the past 10 years. When we were in Brussels, we found that a huge number — approximately 140 people — from the Dublin Government were working in Europe. I know that the Executive have now opened up an office there, albeit with a small number of staff, whom we met when we were there, and that is to be welcomed. I think

that what they need to do is start working together and identifying particular projects on the island of Ireland.

TEN-T is very focused on moving freight and goods by train.

That is fine across large sections of Europe, most of which has no water borders and is all land. We should not forget that we must have road infrastructure. They are trying to get away from road infrastructure for environmental reasons and move as many goods as possible by rail. We have a small population, and we are very dispersed on the island of Ireland. But, again, we should not allow moneys that we believe can be sought from Europe over the next period to go to eastern Europe. We are not saying that eastern Europe should not get its fair share of the money.

I believe that, if we stay in the context of the North of Ireland, it is too narrow. It will become even more peripheral and less competitive, and the Minister, as the motion says, needs to work with his counterparts in Dublin over the next number of months and, hopefully, push for as much funding as possible from the European tranche that is coming up.

Mr Dickson: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after "Development" and insert

"to work with his counterparts in the Irish, Scottish, Welsh and British Governments in seeking the maximum amount of EU funding available for transport; and further calls on the European Commission to recognise Northern Ireland's variance in terms of transport needs and existing infrastructure."

We find ourselves in an increasingly competitive global arena, which is shaped by growing interconnectedness. In such a competitive international environment, transport is vital for providing access to markets, increasing the availability of skilled labour and improving our quality of life. These are all key factors in promoting business and growth. Putting in place good transport infrastructure and services is, therefore, essential in providing for Northern Ireland's economic and social well-being.

In recent years, we have benefited from approximately £18 million in TEN-T funding. However, looking forward, the proposed regulations will limit our ability to benefit from the programme in the next funding period. TEN-T is being transformed from what is essentially a funding programme to a transport

infrastructure policy within the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), as its main funding instrument.

Alarmingly, regulations for this new network could deny us the opportunity to benefit from EU funding and even steer us towards having to implement infrastructure standards that could not be afforded and, indeed, would not be appropriate for Northern Ireland. The Commission is simply failing to recognise that what works on the continent may not work on an island such as ours, which is on the periphery and is historically one of the most underdeveloped regions of the EU.

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

They want us to focus investment on high-speed, long-distance and/or electrified rail, but our railway network is one of the smallest and most isolated in the European Union. They want us to invest in projects that shift freight from road to rail while, geographically and economically, the reality is that most freight cannot be transported in that way on the island of Ireland, North or South.

They exclude all areas from the core network except the eastern seaboard transport corridor and our eastern ports. This means that CEF funding, which is directed exclusively at the core network, will not be available for transport between Belfast and Londonderry, our second city. Failing to influence policy in this area will be detrimental to our transport system, our connectivity and our economy. Added to the likely effect of the current proposed regulations is the reality that the European Union is expanding to the east, and we will face increasing competition from other countries for investment.

The Regional Development Committee, of which I am a member, visited Brussels in April to argue our case, and the vice-Chair has already referred to that. It was somewhat horrifying to discover that officials in Brussels believed that Northern Ireland was connected to Scotland by a tunnel. I am not sure what our MEPs have been doing for the past 30 years, but there you are.

The Minister has since visited Strasbourg and hosted Mr Brian Simpson, chair of the European Parliament's Transport and Tourism Committee. We have been working hard collectively to stress the need for the European Commission to recognise Northern Ireland's variance in this area. It is now time for us, as an Assembly, to speak out with one voice on

this matter, and, on that front, I welcome the support from all parties for this amendment.

That is the first reason why I ask Members to support amendment No 1. The second is that I believe that this amendment effectively widens the scope of the motion to recognise the importance of working with all the Governments of these islands and pursuing all avenues for EU funding for transport.

12.00 noon

The proposers of the original motion are right to stress the importance of working with the Irish Government to advance pre-identified projects under the CEF. Likewise, the proposers of the second amendment are right to stress the important role played by the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in that regard. As the two Administrations on a small and geographically peripheral island, it is imperative that we work together, and we have done so effectively thus far. Together, we have demonstrated the importance of the network from Cork through Dublin to Belfast and on to Larne. We must continue to attract investment into that essential transport corridor but we must also work together, bringing investment into other corridors and areas, such as the north-west, which has the highest rate of economic dependency in both jurisdictions.

The amendment brought by us recognises the importance of this partnership with the Irish Government but also points to the value of co-operation with other Governments. TEN-T priority project 13, for example, shows a road network that connects Cork, Dublin and Belfast with Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham and London via Scottish and Welsh ports. So, it matters to us whether passengers and freight can access our shores easily from London and further afield.

We need to lobby with the Scottish Government about the A75 being a major route for freight and passengers yet remaining single carriageway, not included in the core network. We have to have an interest in the road that connects the eastern Scottish ports with the M6. Likewise, we have an interest in the connectedness of Liverpool, Holyhead and Fishguard. We need to think beyond our shores about the infrastructure and services provided by our neighbours and how those affect our connectivity and, thus, our economic well-being.

Our amendment calls on the Minister to pursue all available avenues of EU funding. The proposers are right to stress the importance of

pre-identified projects under CEF, and as the proposed central funding mechanism for the new TEN-T policy, we need to extract as much as we can from that fund.

Negotiations in Brussels are still ongoing. I commend the work that the Minister has done and is continuing to do. However, we do not know what the outcome of those negotiations will be in terms of this new policy or the overall EU budget. The Minister has lobbied for the inclusion of Derry/Londonderry in the core network, and we await the results of those efforts. We should, however, have the opportunity to apply for other funding streams for investment in our comprehensive network, such as the upcoming INTERREG V. So, we should ask the Minister to do his best to mine such funds and resources.

Our amendment effectively widens the scope of the original motion in ways that should be acceptable to all Members. It demands that we pursue co-operation and investment, and it gives us the opportunity to send a united message to the European Commission. I urge Members to support the amendment.

Mr Dallat: I beg to move amendment No 2:

At end insert

“; and, under the auspices of the NSMC transport sector which has responsibility for reviewing and updating the transport policy for the island, to co-ordinate the transport aspects of EU cross-border programmes and develop plans for specific cross-border transport projects.”

I welcome the motion and hope that the proposers and the Assembly as a whole will support the SDLP amendment.

I am sure that anyone who has had the opportunity to examine the list of pre-identified projects submitted by other member states will realise immediately that there is much to be gained from having a clear focus on the transport projects that qualify under European funding for 2014-2020. Indeed, as a much younger person, one of my memories of the European Union when it came into being was a leading news item that a train could travel from one end of Europe to the other without the difficulties of customs and so on. We are still trying to achieve that objective. That was breaking news then but, unfortunately, our infrastructure has not allowed us to replicate that in the way that we should have been able to.

In the meantime, much has been done to address a complex issue but much more needs to be done and, hopefully, will be done here in this part of the European Union if we can benefit from that European grant money, which is used specifically to address bottlenecks or corridors, call them what you will. The European Commission, in its policy document TEN-T, addressed the complexity of the issue in a very detailed way. As a result, Derry was deemed fit to be part of an overall objective of the TEN-T, which was, in essence, to provide a framework for the development of infrastructure for the smooth running of the internal market and for ensuring economic, social and territorial cohesion and improved accessibility across the European Union.

Members who served in a previous mandate will recall that a great deal of work was done by the Northern Corridor Railways Group, which was made up of seven councils between Derry and Belfast. It made submissions to the Assembly and Dáil Éireann. I hope that that document is still available, because it charts a very intelligent way towards qualifying for European funding. It is not simply the argument that Derry or the north-west should have a railway; in fact, it takes into account the other arguments about population clusters and so on. In the meantime, my colleagues Colum Eastwood and Pat Ramsey have, on several occasions, submitted questions to the Minister for Regional Development that were pertinent to the future funding of road and rail projects that are designed to reduce congestion and emissions, as detailed in 'European Priorities 2011-12: Winning in Europe'. As recently as January this year, they were told that officials intended to submit applications for a number of projects that would help to achieve the objectives set out by the European Union.

Since then, the Regional Development Committee has been to Brussels. I hasten to add that that was just before I joined the Committee; I missed that trip. However, I believe that it was a very useful trip that uncovered some misunderstandings in Europe about our infrastructure, including the one that was just mentioned: the notion that there was a tunnel between here and Scotland. Perhaps those MEPs are suffering from tunnel vision and have not quite corrected that.

I have to acknowledge that the present Minister for Regional Development was in hot pursuit. He has certainly not neglected to follow up the excellent work that was done by the Committee. My only regret is that the previous Minister for Regional Development was not a great deal more proactive in pursuing EU funding

designed to address serious issues that arose out of what I thought he would have acknowledged as the legacy of partition and neglect during the dark days of the Troubles. Mr Murphy was engaged in studying for his doctorate and keeping fit for the triathlon and all those important things, and I do not suggest for one moment that all work and no play does not make Jack a dull boy or anything like that.

Our amendment is essential if we are not to rely on one Minister — sorry, Minister; we do not trust you all that much — to pursue the objectives that have been identified. In the short time available, it is critical that continuous attention is paid to delivering the key objectives if Ireland as a whole is to benefit in the same way as many other European states will benefit from the financial aid available to drive forward a transport infrastructure that is fit for purpose in a modern Europe, capable of competing in a world market where time and accessibility are of the essence.

Whatever our political differences, there should be no difference when it comes to driving forward a transport infrastructure that is fit for purpose.

Without wanting to appear parochial, I say that there is a crying need to begin in the north-west, where road and rail need massive investment on a scale that cannot be done without EU assistance. It would be totally remiss of me not to acknowledge the endeavours of the current Minister, who found the money to at least be able to say that although the Derry-Coleraine section of the railway is currently closed, there are expectations that, in the future, it will play a major role in delivering what, I think, we all want.

There is no good reason why we should not have a rail transport system that is capable of operating between Cork and Derry. Many people ask why that is not further up the agenda. From my research, I know that the European investment in the Cork to Dublin section of the line was based on the expectation that it would continue as part of the TEN-T project. There has been a focus on making improvements to the Dublin to Belfast line, but regrettably, that has not resulted in a dedicated line for the Enterprise service or in any serious attempt to transfer goods from road to rail. I do not accept that it is not possible for us to seriously consider transferring much of the freight that is moved by road to rail over long distances. I think that it is 300 miles from Cork to Belfast.

Returning to the north-west, Members know that the Knockmore line between Antrim and Lisburn remains mothballed. That has been a serious impediment to the development of a rail service between Derry and Dublin. That does not present an image of a modern state in the European Union, and I suggest that, if that situation existed in any other part of the European Union, it would be a priority to be tackled without delay. Those bottlenecks, or corridors, as I call them, are serious impediments to the economic and social development of the areas that are affected. They need to be addressed with a synergy that I believe has, sadly, been lacking in the past.

Several times in the past year, the SDLP discussed with the Dublin Government the need for co-operation and the building of cross-border transport infrastructure. That would deal with road, rail and air transport links and, indeed Minister, dare I suggest, the vexed question of the Foyle ferry service, which is currently tied up in dock. We believe that there is a willingness to face up to those challenges, if only we could maintain the momentum that is needed to drive it forward. It is not simply a question of yes or no. It is essential that we play our part in improving our environment, and one of the main causes of bad environmental conditions is the failure to address our transport needs in a modern and efficient way.

We believe that the North/South Ministerial Council transport sector, which has a responsibility for reviewing and updating the transport policy for the island, is the most appropriate body for the Minister for Regional Development to work with. Working in that way would give us a better chance of co-ordinating the transport aspects of EU cross-border programmes and developing plans for specific cross-border projects.

We are now part of a bigger European community —

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

Mr Dallat: — where economic strength is measured by the speed at which we can move people and goods. I urge the Minister to go for it.

Mr I McCrea: From the outset, I apologise if I cough and splutter through any part of my contribution. I have tried my best to get rid of this cold. I believe that I was able to pass it on to Mr Dickson, a member of the Regional Development Committee, after last week's

Committee meeting, but, so far, I have not been able to get rid of all of it. Nonetheless —

Mr Kennedy: Power sharing.

Mr I McCrea: Indeed; it is power sharing at its best. I am happy to share it with any other Member.

When I read the motion, my initial reaction was that it was very short-sighted, as were the Members who proposed it. I welcome the Alliance Party amendment, which would see the benefit of the Minister working with his counterparts in the Scottish, Welsh and British Governments and, indeed, in the Government in the Irish Republic. I think that we should also add to that the need to work alongside our MEPs to try to get the necessary investment in Northern Ireland.

I suppose I find it somewhat difficult to understand the benefits that the proposal might bring to my constituency. As you know, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, Mid Ulster does not benefit from having great public transport, and we certainly do not have a rail network, the need for which was referred to by Mr Dallat. I will be happy to work with the Minister and encourage him to seek investment for that much-needed rail network.

12.15 pm

As part of the regional development strategy that the Minister launched, Cookstown was upgraded to a main hub, as was Dungannon. Unfortunately, Magherafelt did not make it, but we will work on that. The benefits that those upgrades brought to the constituency were welcomed. However, the transport network has to follow that. In that respect, I believe that the work that the Minister is doing and the TEN-T proposals can benefit my constituency.

On reading some of the paperwork related to the debate, I took note of a memo dated 19 October that deals with connecting Europe and the new EU core transport network. Key facts and figures in that include:

"The core network will connect: 83 main European ports with rail and road links; 37 key airports with rail connections into major cities; 15,000 km of railway line upgraded to high speed; and 35 cross border projects to reduce bottlenecks."

Before anyone gets too excited, I must say that the cross-border element that I am considering is between east and west and how we improve

the links that are there. It is important that we do what we can to transform the existing patchwork of roads, railways, airports and canals across Europe, as intended by TEN-T, and I wish the Minister well as he continues to fight for funding from Europe.

This is also important for tourism. We have a great product in Northern Ireland, but we strive to utilise the benefits of our public transport to help tourism.

I recall that someone referred to —

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

Mr I McCrea: — freight travel. I am not sure that that is too likely or that I can imagine a herd of cows in the back of one of our new trains. Nonetheless, it is something that we should strive to get to grips with.

Mrs Overend: I believe the motion to be extremely premature, as negotiations around pre-identified projects are ongoing and the list that is referred to is, as of now, only in draft form. The items on the list make broad reference to indicative projects and not to definitive projects. Indeed, I believe that the Members who tabled the motion know that it is premature, because it was tabled a number of weeks ago and subsequently withdrawn until such a time as the list of projects was to become finalised. I understand that the signatories to the motion accepted that point at the time. They were even told when the draft list would be finalised and, as such, the appropriate time to table the motion. Therefore, yet again, farcically, a motion comes before the House at a most unsatisfactory time. The pre-identified list still does not include any actual projects in Northern Ireland, and those that it does include are only indicative. Until TEN-T regulations are settled, there will not be a definitive list of projects.

My party will support only the Alliance Party amendment, which moves the debate away from the draft pre-identified list and is therefore capable of support. Although that particular amendment may not be ideal, we accept that Northern Ireland needs to utilise all avenues possible in order to influence policy and ensure that we are not left behind as the budget negotiations continue. As such, we support the call for the Minister to work with his counterparts in the Irish, Scottish, Welsh and British Governments in seeking the maximum amount of EU funding available for transport, which is what he has been doing to date.

Mr Easton: Having an effective infrastructure is vital to allow Northern Ireland to recover from the current economic climate, develop potential investment and tourist opportunities and ensure the economic future of our devolved administration. The EU offers the potential to develop key infrastructure, not just in Northern Ireland but throughout Europe, which will aid the movement of freight and, ultimately, people across the region. We must continue to work to ensure that there is more competition in the transport system and that the network becomes integrated to link different transport modes.

So much of our transport system is fragmented. For example, if a person wants to get the ferry to Liverpool, the most frequent bus service drops them at the Mount Vernon estate in north Belfast, leaving a walk of approximately two miles, or the person has to get a taxi or have their own form of transport. The regeneration of the roads in Belfast city centre used data showing that public transport is vital to Northern Ireland as a high proportion of households do not have access to a car and are therefore reliant on public transport.

Northern Ireland is unique, in that most of our freight travels by road and not rail. Our rail infrastructure is lagging behind that in other parts of the United Kingdom, and the amount of capital required to bring it up to speed could be better spent by working with road networks as opposed to rail networks. We also, like the Republic of Ireland, have a large rural population, which needs to have jobs, schools, and access to goods and services. Again, a rail network may not be the best way to address its needs and issues.

We must ensure that, through our work, we bring attention to our major unique selling point in accessing funds, which is that we do not have any immediate land borders with mainland European countries. It is therefore imperative that we work hand in hand with other Administrations —

Mr McMullan: I thank the Member for giving way. He talks about transport in rural areas, and I agree with him. Does he agree that the rural White Paper could be a template for driving that forward and making good examples? We need better transport to link rural areas with urban areas for jobs, tourism and creating the wealth that we so greatly need at the present time.

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

Mr Easton: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is certainly something that we need to have a closer look at.

It is imperative that we work hand in hand with other Administrations and Governments in the same position in order to bring a loud voice to the opportunities and challenges that those differences bring to our countries. By working together and providing a cohesive force, we can ensure that the regional variations that exist in our region can be heard and accounted for.

It is vital that regional variations are taken into account in European policy. Our differences make us unique and give each region its own strengths and weaknesses. This is not about making a patchwork of how the policy is developed and delivered, it is about allowing each region to invest the funds in such a way that value-added outcomes and outputs are achieved. To ignore regional variations would be reckless and would not deliver as many benefits to either the EU, the region, business or the citizens who reside in this region.

I support the Alliance Party's amendment, as the motion by Sinn Féin is the usual all-Ireland agenda. The motion needs to include the rest of the United Kingdom, from east to west and from north to south, which identifies the importance of regions. We have similar issues and profiles working together in partnership to ensure that their region benefits from the maximum amount of EU funding. That is why I feel that politics is about building relationships and social capital, not just across the UK but with other nations, to receive the best outcomes for all concerned. I also support the uniqueness of Northern Ireland, and call on the European Commissioner to embrace and recognise the variation that we in Northern Ireland experience in terms of transport needs and existing infrastructure. I support the Alliance Party's amendment.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion, and I also want to say a few words on the two amendments. The mission statement of the Trans-European Network says that

"The future prosperity of our continent will depend on the ability of all its regions to remain fully and competitively integrated in the world economy. Efficient transport is vital in making this happen."

Like Mr Dallat, except, perhaps, a few years later, I travelled extensively in western and eastern Europe, and I always marvelled that Europe as it was then, particularly the eastern

part, having suffered what it did during two world wars and especially in the Second World War, had the infrastructure that it did.

The island of Ireland did not suffer the same effects during World War II, but unfortunately this has not been the case, particularly in terms of the rail network. If we look back in history to 100 years ago, every village on the island was no more than a mere five miles away from a railway track. It takes very little imagination to see what the implications for trade and tourism would have been had that situation been maintained.

Instead, the roads system received priority, and now it groans at the seams. Two minor collisions this morning added an extra half an hour to my journey here. All the while, that is costing commuters in the form of fuel increases. As circumstances are now substantially different, I believe that that must change.

As the motion states, the pre-identified projects list must seek to address the outstanding issues, including rail transport, on this island. As my colleague Martina Anderson MEP said on 16 October, there are a number of spurs and lines but no real network on the island outside of the Belfast, Dublin and Cork axis. The tabling of over 1,000 amendments to the TEN-T draft report was met with dismay and derision earlier this month, with a dismissal of "purely regional" concerns.

That is one of the reasons why I had a concern about the Alliance Party amendment. However, having listened to Stewart Dickson, I take on board what he said about the A75 and the Welsh ports as part of an integrated transport system on this island as well. I have to say that he has won me over on that one.

This, I believe, presents a unique opportunity for the implementation of a strategic transport plan that falls under the remit of the all-Ireland Ministerial Council. I believe that the main tenet of any strategy should include a western arc project that would entail a western rail network extending from Belfast through Derry, Sligo, Knock and Galway to Shannon — and that includes the new deep-water spur at Foynes — and on to Limerick. That would, for the first time in many years, link in with the existing railways, connect with Cork and Dublin and go back to Belfast.

The tourism and commerce opportunities that would be provided by this network could form the basis of an all-Ireland means of redressing the effects of the economic downturn and, in particular, help the construction sector. It would

undoubtedly help the fight against climate change, and would be the first real attempt to reinstate freight and passenger transport and traffic for the 21st century and beyond. It would also connect all the major airports on the island — Derry, Knock, Shannon, Cork, Dublin and Belfast City Airport — with the exception of Aldergrove. Imagine the benefits that that would have for our tourism product.

For the first time, the infrastructural deficiencies that are so often quoted as a bar to sustainable investment outside the Belfast/Dublin east coast axis will no longer be a deterrent. During the summer we met representatives of the Mayo and Sligo Chambers of Commerce to tease out some of the issues that they have with importation. We must remember that 30% of the world's Coca-Cola comes from Mayo, which is not exactly the centre of the universe.

The Executive and the Irish Government should prioritise and develop proposals jointly for the deployment of EU structural funds. In the past, the lack of a co-ordinated approach meant a disparity of delivery North and South.

We should not labour under the illusion that this would not be a huge financial investment. However, years of underinvestment have left a bitter legacy. If the political will exists, projects such as the western arc could be delivered under the Trans-European Network and the vastly untapped financial assistance contained therein. All MEPs on this island, and Members of the Assembly and the Dáil, should be actively lobbying for this in the next round of European funding, particularly during the upcoming European presidency.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: I believe that this debate is timely. The Committee will vote on the matter today and it will be in plenary in January. The House should support the motion.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. This debate will continue at 3.00 pm, when the next contributor will be Mr Jim Allister.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

On resuming —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer. As Mr McGlone is not in his place to ask question 1, I call Ross Hussey

Programme for Government: Targets

2. **Mr Hussey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of how their Department monitors and reports on delivery against Programme for Government targets. (AQO 2962/11-15)

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): Since the inception of this Programme for Government (PFG), Executive Ministers have repeatedly made it clear that our focus is on delivering substantial and tangible outcomes that will positively affect the lives of people in Northern Ireland, both in the short and long term. Our Programme for Government sets challenging targets in these difficult economic times. We need to show resourcefulness in the way that we tackle the problems presented to us and a determination to make the changes necessary to deliver economic growth, create opportunities, tackle disadvantage and improve health and well-being.

In developing our Programme for Government, we carefully considered how delivery would be managed. I believe that we have developed a strong and effective framework for doing so. The responsibility for monitoring progress against targets lies with a central team from within the Office of the first Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) and the Department of Finance and Personnel, which acts independently in collecting evidence from Departments for objective analysis.

The Programme for Government delivery oversight group, which is headed by the head of the Civil Service, meets regularly to assess reports prepared by the central team with the purpose of driving programme delivery and providing assurance to the Executive programme board. That board is chaired by the

deputy First Minister and myself, supported by the Minister of Finance and Personnel.

We have also taken steps to modernise the overall approach to monitoring and reporting by making much greater use of online systems. That will provide us with a much greater ability to access and consider data in real time and share information electronically, securely and more effectively than we could have done previously. The arrangements that we have introduced have been positively received and have helped considerably in focusing activities and strengthening accountability, both of which will support us in our endeavours to deliver, through the Programme for Government, the real and lasting change that people here deserve.

Mr Hussey: I thank the First Minister for his answer. Can he outline why there has been a slippage in how his Department is monitoring and reporting on delivery against the Programme for Government compared with other Departments? When will the relevant Committee have sight of the most up-to-date information?

Mr P Robinson: There is no delay. There is ongoing monitoring of Programme for Government targets in the Department. As I understand it, the delivery plan has been given, in its initial form, to the Committee. I understand that our officials are meeting with the Committee tomorrow, I think, and will provide a more up-to-date copy of the delivery plan.

As far as the overall assessment of where we stand against Programme for Government targets is concerned, I believe that a meeting is being scheduled, probably for later this week, at which the copy that will go to all of the Committees will be signed off, depending, of course, on the position of each of the Ministers.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the First Minister for the correspondence that his Department has exchanged with me in relation to this issue. Can he give the House a bit more detail on why he thinks that forwarding the departmental official quarterly reports presented to Ministers to each relevant Committee is a matter for the Committees to decide rather than part of a formal process for overall monitoring of the PFG?

Mr P Robinson: Let us be clear: there is a formal process that will be undertaken and that will be consistent across all Departments in respect of how we make the assessments. The

deputy First Minister and I, in our position, obviously have an overall responsibility, in conjunction with the Finance Minister, to have all the assessments monitored continually. We will do that. We have put in place a much more rigorous system on this occasion than was the case for the previous Programme for Government. I believe that the new process that we have in place will be more helpful to Committees in letting them see more precisely where each of the commitment targets stand. I hope that he will find the new process much more useful than before.

We are absolutely determined. The heart of this is about delivery. The deputy First Minister and I have committed to doing our absolute best to deliver, as far as we can, the 82 commitments in the Programme for Government. I suppose that I have just made an eighty-third commitment. To do that, we require the most up-to-date and accurate data possible. We have put in place, through the senior responsible officers (SROs) and so forth in each of the Departments, mechanisms by which we can get that information. We are starting to use online technology to access that information, and we are using it in a way that suits our needs. We have other mechanisms to ensure that, if we fall behind on any of the commitments, there are mechanisms in place whereby we can pull people up to the appropriate speed.

Mr D McIlveen: Will the First Minister indicate how he believes the Executive are performing against their Programme for Government targets?

Mr P Robinson: I do not want to give a detailed response to that, because it is right that each of the Departments gets the assessment on the foot of the report that has been prepared by officials and, I hope, will be signed-off on within days. As I look at that report, I can give him a general opinion. There has been very considerable improvement on the delivery against targets compared with that in the last Programme for Government. None of the targets that we have set are out of reach, but I would not expect any of them to be out of reach so early in the cycle.

Mr McDevitt: I am sure that the House was very encouraged to hear that the First and deputy First Minister receive real-time data on the performance against the Programme for Government targets. The First Minister will, of course, be able to confirm to the House in real-time terms that youth unemployment has risen every month for the past 12 months and is at a

historically high level. Maybe, he could tell the House what steps, specifically in the Programme for Government, have been taken to address that?

Mr P Robinson: I can confirm that, around the world, youth unemployment has risen considerably over the past number of months. We are in what is known as "a worldwide recession". A global downturn impacts everywhere, which is why we have tailored a number of the proposals that we have brought out: emergency proposals, you might say. I do not know what he is pointing to the sky for: if he is looking for divine intervention, I am happy to pray with him.

We brought forward proposals that recognised that there was a need to increase the skills that were available so that people would be able to move into jobs when they became available. I am absolutely convinced that the economic strategy that the Assembly and Executive have endorsed is the right one, but I recognise that, because of the particular problems with the downturn, there are immediate steps that we can take to try to alleviate some of the hardship that is being felt. That is why we have taken the immediate decision to bring those interventions forward. It is far better that there are people acting instead of carping.

Active Ageing Strategy

3. **Mr I McCrea** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Active Ageing strategy. (AQO 2963/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I ask junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer this question.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): In developing the Active Ageing strategy, officials have benefited enormously from working closely with the Ageing Strategy Advisory Group, chaired by Claire Keatinge, the Commissioner for Older People. Junior Minister McCann and I met with Claire Keatinge and discussed the development of the strategy. We also met with representatives from Age Sector Platform on that issue and related matters.

One matter we discussed was the fact that in order to support the objectives of this year, which is the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations, we are currently managing a small grants scheme, with

£200,000 available to support suitable small projects across Northern Ireland.

The focus of our work with the Ageing Strategy Advisory Group is on the draft early actions plan, which will have clear and ambitious targets to implement the strategy through the Delivering Social Change framework. To develop the early action plan, officials are meeting with relevant Departments to discuss how OFMDFM can add to the ongoing work on a number of key issues for older people. Those issues include the fear of crime; fuel poverty, including the question of social-energy tariffs; and adult social care. In addition, officials are working with the World Health Organization's age-friendly cities initiative. Following Belfast's success in becoming an age-friendly city, officials will meet with representatives from the council and from the Belfast Healthy Ageing Strategic Partnership on 11 December to consider whether the age-friendly cities initiative can be rolled out more widely across Northern Ireland. We have also commissioned advice from the Public Health Agency on how OFMDFM can contribute to the active ageing agenda.

Mr I McCrea: The junior Minister referred to the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. Could he update the House on what the Department is doing as part of that?

Mr Bell: To support the objectives, we launched an EY 2012 small grants scheme, and £200,000 is available for projects under that scheme. A total of 77 funding applications were received, and the total amount that was being claimed in the applications was just over £900,000. A further four applications were received for managing a micromanagement scheme. An independent panel has reviewed and assessed the applications, and the top 16 were considered for funding. Verification checks have been completed, and letters of offer have now been issued. The successful projects will be published on the website once all necessary checks are completed.

To give an understanding of the projects, I can tell the House that they range from those involving older people working with local primary schools to inspire new generations; older people working with their peers to encourage them to take an active part in society; increasing the physical and mental well-being of older people with disabilities; inspiring younger people to become more involved in what may have been presumed to be traditional crafts; young people helping older people to tackle rural social exclusion;

promoting the use of information computer technology to older people with mentoring from younger people; and generations gardening together to promote intergenerational issues and healthy lifestyles.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline whether any signature projects, similar to those for children and young people, will be associated with the emerging early actions paper in the Active Ageing strategy under the Delivering Social Change framework?

Mr Bell: As I said, a number of projects are under way. They are specifically designed to bring older and younger people together. Where active ageing is concerned, junior Minister McCann and I will meet the Age Sector Platform. We do that on a regular basis, usually at least quarterly, and we take guidance from it on its steer about what older people need and want. As I said, we will tie together as comprehensive a package as we can that is tailor-fit to meet the needs of the older people in our society.

Mr Rogers: Will the Minister lend his support to the silver saver campaign, which is led by the Age Sector Platform?

Mr Bell: Not only can I say that I will but I already did at the DUP party conference on Saturday. I give my full endorsement to the work that it is undertaking. In many cases, our older people have paid in to this society throughout their working lives, and they deserve respect and to get something back from society in their later years. We will certainly endorse that project.

Mr Kinahan: It is good to see to actions rather than strategies. Given that a lot of this work is cross-departmental and that he touched on health issues, what advice did the Department of Health give to him, particularly given the changing demographics?

Mr Bell: In this strategy and in Delivering Social Change, we look at what we can do to benefit all people in our society. We have a co-ordinating role across the Executive; obviously the specifics are for my colleague Edwin Poots. I and my colleagues from Strangford recently met the chief executive of the South Eastern Trust, and we are preparing for a town of the approximate size of Ballynahinch, given the good news story, which we should celebrate, that our older people are living longer.

We are also seeing a number of measures in the health service for people to be monitored at home so that they do not have to go into hospital. Their vital signs can be monitored at home through a whole range of information and computer technology and can be transmitted in real time to the consultants and doctors responsible for them. That allows for more effective monitoring and allows people the independence to live in their own home, which they wish to do. The feedback from older people whom I have spoken to who have benefited has been that it is a great success.

However, we need to reframe the debate. In the past, it has been that our older people are getting older and living longer and that that is a burden. We need to reframe the debate to say that our older people are getting older and that we should celebrate that.

2.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 4 and 5 have been withdrawn.

FM/DFM: Visit to Fermanagh

6. **Mr Lynch** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update following their most recent joint visit to Fermanagh. (AQO 2966/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I hope that we will come back to the subject of Members withdrawing questions without any notice being given to us before we rise to our feet. That is three questions that have been withdrawn today.

We attended a meeting with Mr Lynch, six other MLAs and the MP for Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Fermanagh District Council was present, as was the South West College in Enniskillen. The meeting took place on 5 September, and we were given a presentation on the issues surrounding rates convergence and proposals from Fermanagh District Council for the creation of a public sector hub to provide central services on the old Erne Hospital site.

At the meeting, we indicated that we would reflect on the discussions. We responded to Mr Lynch on 21 September to highlight the fact that the issue of future rates bills in the new council model was to be considered by the Department of the Environment as part of the work of the finance working group of the regional transition committee. We also wrote to Departments on 24 October for their views on the public sector hub.

The Strategic Investment Board is now working to explore how the project could be progressed and is liaising with the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Department for Employment and Learning on the proposed project. We are now waiting on the results of their deliberations.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the First and deputy First Ministers for coming to Enniskillen for that productive meeting. Does the First Minister think that some of the issues that are blocking progress on the public sector hub site can be resolved?

Mr P Robinson: The deputy First Minister and I were impressed with the council's proposal. We felt that it was very sound and exactly the kind of development that we want to encourage. However, there were some difficulties, particularly with having a survey carried out to determine whether there was any requirement on the site as a result of any past toxic use. There were issues relating to the role of any accounting officer in taking on risk with that subject. The clerk of Fermanagh District Council, as an accounting officer, felt that it would be beyond his responsibility to take that risk. I suspect that, if it were left to each of the accounting officers in Departments, each might come up with the same answer, so we have to try to unlock all of that.

We are up against a time restriction, because the money that the college can put into the hub will probably only sit there until the end of the year. So, we are very keen to try to unlock it. We are waiting for the responses from the Ministers, although I understand that, for instance, there will be a requirement from some Departments to find capital funding for some of the elements of the project, and that funding may not be immediately available. That would not stop us from being able to clinch the overall deal relating to the site, if we can find a way of unlocking it.

Mr Campbell: Having viewed what appears to be a successful public sector hub in Fermanagh, does the First Minister feel that similar exercises could be replicated in other parts of Northern Ireland in an attempt to draw together the various aspects of the public sector to the public good?

Mr P Robinson: The proposal from Fermanagh is a very good template that could be used elsewhere in the Province.

My guess is that the Member has a particular location and site in mind. On that site, a good many buildings are available without our having to worry about decontamination issues, although some parts of the site may well have decontamination issues attached to them. However, it would not stop the other parts of the site being used. It would depend largely on the enthusiasm shown by the council, because the council's involvement obviously has a financial consequence.

Mr McClarty: I congratulate all those involved on attracting the G8 conference to Fermanagh. What role will the First Minister and the deputy First Minister play, if any, at the G8 conference when it comes to Fermanagh?

Mr P Robinson: Like the Member, I am very glad that the G8 conference will be coming to Northern Ireland. Fermanagh is an ideal place for it to be based. Given the beauty of the countryside around there and its rural aspect, it lends itself very considerably to the kind of atmosphere that they will want to create. Of course, Northern Ireland will want to showcase itself to the world when the attention of the world is on the conference. We have discussed the issue with the Prime Minister, and there will be a role for Northern Ireland to play. Do not forget that it is possible that some of the G8 leaders may decide to do something outside the conference, and we would certainly encourage them to do so.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Raymond McCartney is not in place. Joe Byrne is not in his place. I call Mr Alban Maginness.

Mr A Maginness: Question 9, Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr P Robinson: I understand that question 9 has been transferred to Finance and Personnel, because it is that Department's responsibility.

Mr A Maginness: I was unaware of that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I was also unaware of it. We will move to the next question. Tom Elliott is not in his place, and David McNarry is not in his place. I call Steven Agnew.

Children's Issues

12. **Mr Agnew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the level of departmental collaboration on children's issues. (AQO 2972/11-15)

Mr P Robinson: With your permission, I will ask my colleague junior Minister Jonathan Bell to answer that question.

Mr Bell: We recognise that many issues that children and young people face are cross-cutting and require co-operation across Executive Departments. We have introduced a new Delivering Social Change framework to ensure that all Departments work together to deal with these issues. The framework seeks to build and extend existing departmental co-operation to deliver improvements in the health, well-being and life opportunities of children and young people and a sustained reduction in poverty and the associated issues across all ages. It is led by the Executive's ministerial subcommittee on poverty and social inclusion and its ministerial subcommittee on children and young people. Both subcommittees are chaired by junior Minister McCann and me, with all the Executive's Ministers as members. The subcommittees are then supported by the Delivering Social Change programme board, which is also chaired by junior Minister McCann and me, and the members are senior officials from across Departments and our own special advisers. We meet every eight weeks to ensure that the key milestones and targets that we have are achieved. You will also be aware that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is responsible for the co-ordination of the planning and delivery of children's services.

Mr Agnew: I thank the junior Minister for his answer. I am sure that neither he nor I expected to get to question 12. Does he believe that giving Departments the ability to pool budgets in commissioning children's services would be an advantage and, indeed, could improve the efficiency of how we deliver children's services?

Mr Bell: I think the best model is the one that we are using for Delivering Social Change. When you look at improving children's health, education and life opportunities, who is to say that health delivers a better educational opportunity or that education delivers a better health opportunity? That is why we need to focus on the areas that particularly matter. We know that early intervention with children makes a significant difference. Junior Minister Anderson and junior Minister McCann had a series of bilaterals with each individual Minister where we raised those specific issues, and we intend to continue with that. I also know that the Executive are working in a joined-up way, particularly around health, education and early years, to see what we can deliver.

The other big issue, as we know, is childcare, and we have ring-fenced £12 million to deliver that. We spent several hundred thousand pounds of that last year, we have bids in at the minute, and we are probably looking at several million pounds being spent this year. We are confident that we will spend the fulfilment of that throughout. OFMDFM has taken on the role of co-ordinating that across all Departments. We need to remain focused on what we can do to raise young people and families out of poverty. To take children out of poverty, we have to take the family out of poverty. You saw the Executive's initiative and the associated £200 million, and you saw an earlier initiative involving tens of millions of pounds to focus on literacy and numeracy and how we nurtured children through the school experience that has been so successful already. The Executive have already acted in a joined-up way on those measures and are delivering for children.

Mr Storey: I thank the junior Minister for his answers thus far and for his commitment to the importance of early intervention. The junior Minister will be aware that Employers for Childcare has recently produced its report, which outlines the high costs for the provision of childcare. How will that very prevalent issue be taken into account?

Mr Bell: I thank the Member for his point. Along with junior Minister McCann, I had the privilege of helping to launch that report yesterday. I commend the work that Employers for Childcare has done, not just this year but over the past three years. OFMDFM also commissioned work from McClure Watters so that we had a firm evidence base, and that informs all of our practice. When we talk about childcare, it is important that we constantly look to research to develop the areas and gaps that exist. We are focused on ensuring that childcare is affordable, accessible and flexible. When I was in a studio talking about childcare on Thursday night, my 80-year-old father was at home looking after my children, and I pay tribute to all the grandparents out there who provide childcare. We also do a lot of work with the early years-led organisations to make sure that there is a standard across the board and that children get childcare of an adequate standard.

I also pay tribute to many organisations. My colleague William Humphrey brought me to the Shankill Women's Centre. One of the things that most impressed me out of several things that impressed me when visiting that women's centre was that none of the women who went for support, whether that was educational support, job training, counselling services or

parenting classes, was put off going to the centre, because it had on-site quality crèche facilities. That is the type of childcare-led initiative that delivers real answers and solutions to problems that exist on the ground.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the junior Minister for his answers so far. We had an important debate in the Senate Chamber this morning. One of the main things to come out of that was the lack of joined-up departmental working on children and people with learning disabilities. Will the junior Minister assure the Assembly that his Department will make every effort to ensure that there is a joined-up government approach on learning for children with learning disabilities?

Mr Bell: You raise an important matter. We aim to issue our childcare strategy before Christmas, and we hope to have it to the Executive shortly. When that is issued, you will see where we have also looked at research into the specific area of the people who care for those with a learning disability. That raises bespoke issues. Employers for Childcare also did some work around the matter with regard to physical and learning difficulties and the needs of parents and caregivers in accessing that service. We are aware of that, and I certainly give you the assurance that we will do all in our power, across Departments, to ensure that we can deliver the best service to children with learning difficulties.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. We have just witnessed an OFMDFM Question Time at which seven questions that were tabled for response were not asked. I understand that two were withdrawn, but five Members were not present to ask their question. Given the effort and time that is put into the work required to respond to those questions, particularly by civil servants, not to mention the work of the First Minister, who has to stand up and answer them along with the junior Minister in the Department, and given the workload with being in China and Cardiff and all the other responsibilities that Ministers have at that level of government, I have to say that it is an absolute disgrace that so many Members were not present to ask their question. I think that it is time for the Speaker

to consider very seriously penalising the Members who did not turn up.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Certainly, it is a serious concern, and I will draw it to the Speaker's attention.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any further points of order on it at this time. We move on to the questions to the Minister of Justice. I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell.

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any points of order at this time.

Mr A Maginness: Principal Deputy Speaker, the deputy First Minister —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to resume his seat. I have said that I am not taking any further points of order at this time. We can deal with the issue after Question Time if there are any other points of order.

We move on to the questions to the Minister of Justice. I call Dr Alasdair McDonnell.

Justice

Prison Service Staff: Security

1. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on security for prison officers and prison staff, following the murder of David Black and recent media reports of photographic and recording devices being found on a prisoner in Maghaberry Prison. (AQO 2976/11-15)

4. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Justice what action he has taken to improve the personal security of prison officers. (AQO 2979/11-15)

12. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Justice what security arrangements are in place for prison officers. (AQO 2987/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): With permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 1, 4 and 12 together.

As I have previously made clear, my Department and the Prison Service regard the safety and the personal security of prison staff as a high priority. The director general has, therefore, already arranged for all prison staff to be issued with advice on personal security and a reminder of the need for vigilance on and off duty. My Department and the Prison Service will continue to work closely with the appropriate authorities to consider any security concerns and the implications for staff safety. Indeed, I met the Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Office Minister of State recently to discuss the current security situation and to consider what measures are in place to protect prison staff.

Since I last reported to the Assembly on the matter, a number of changes have been made to the Prison Service protection scheme and to the processes for officers leaving the Prison Service who wish to apply to have a personal protection weapon. However, I trust that Members will agree that it is not in the best interests of prison staff to provide specific details of the other changes made or under consideration in relation to the personal security arrangements for prison staff. A number of meetings have taken place between the PSNI and Prison Service senior managers, and I am confident that appropriate and up-to-date advice on personal security will continue to be provided to Prison Service staff.

Finally, I can also confirm that a watch with an inbuilt camera and recording facility was found on a prisoner during a routine search at Maghaberry prison on 8 October this year. The prisoner concerned was charged under prison rules for the possession of a prohibited article.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his answer so far. I endorse all his efforts and urge him to take every step necessary to ensure that prison staff are safe.

Recently, I heard the Minister on the radio discussing the BOSS chair. Can he give us some information on progress on that? That might de-escalate some of the tensions in the prisons.

Mr Ford: I thank Dr McDonnell for the compliments that he made at the start of his comments. He asked specifically about the BOSS chair. A BOSS chair is currently in use in Maghaberry prison for the searching of prisoners in separated accommodation moving within the prison. There is different work ongoing with regard to the searching of prisoners that would relate to all three institutions for people coming and going.

I was tempted to say that Mr McElduff might complain if I intruded on his question and went too far on that, but it appears that he has joined the group of absentees and may have to have a written answer.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for this answer so far. Given the device that detached itself on the Ballygomartin Road, yesterday's attack on the police in west Belfast and the general security situation, can the Minister assure the House that his Department is working with the Northern Ireland Office, hand in glove, as closely as possible, to protect prison officers, police officers and security personnel across Northern Ireland at what is a very difficult time in the security situation?

Mr Ford: I can certainly give Mr Humphrey that assurance. There have, as I said, been meetings between Prison Service staff and the PSNI. I have had meetings with the Northern Ireland Office and the Chief Constable. I know that there are obviously issues of concern for army personnel around some of the other concerns that have been raised recently. I believe that all that is being done is necessary, appropriate and proportionate. That work will continue, to ensure the protection of all who are seen to be at particular risk at this stage.

Mr Nesbitt: Without going into the fine detail, will the Minister assure the House that interim arrangements for firearm licensing will ensure that past delays are no longer an issue in the issuing and granting of personal protection weapons?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Nesbitt for that point. I have received assurances from the PSNI, from the Deputy Chief Constable, about speeding up the issue of the application for approval for PPWs for those retiring from the Prison Service and that that will be done in the timescale of the notice that individuals have when they are leaving. That is probably as far as I need to go in this forum.

Mr Allister: In his review, touching on the serious issue of security, has the Minister reviewed the arrangements for home security for prison officers, particularly in respect of those who were removed from the home security scheme and told that it was their responsibility to pay for and maintain such facilities as had been provided? Will he reinstate the facilities for those members, so that they might have the comfort of believing that they have some level of security at home?

Mr Ford: I have previously advised the House but am certainly happy to repeat today that the Prison Service protection scheme for officers' homes has been re-examined in recent weeks. It has been decided that, where equipment has been supplied, it will continue to be maintained, contrary to the position a short time ago. I believe that the issue he raises is already being addressed.

Counterfeit Cigarettes

2. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister of Justice how many prosecutions and convictions there have been for the selling of counterfeit cigarettes in the last five years. (AQO 2977/11-15)

Mr Ford: The information requested is not available in the format desired, as court conviction and sentencing data do not distinguish counterfeit cigarettes from other evasion of duty or intent to defraud offences. However, I can advise that, between 2005 and 2009, there were 64 prosecutions and 31 people were convicted of offences relating to evasion of duty under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979. In the 2011-12 financial year, over 23 million counterfeit cigarettes were seized in Northern Ireland by HMRC and the UK Border Agency. At an operational level, the police and HMRC are working with the industry to tackle this crime. Operations are mounted on a proactive and intelligence-led basis against those involved in the sale of counterfeit cigarettes.

As chair of the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF), I can advise that intellectual property crime, which includes this crime, is a key threat. The OCTF has a dedicated intellectual property crime subgroup, which acts as a forum for law enforcement agencies and a number of business partners to develop strategies to deal with issues associated with intellectual property crime, including the sale of counterfeit tobacco.

It should be said that, while enforcement is important in addressing the supply side of the counterfeit tobacco problem, work must continue to tackle the demand side and the support given by the public, knowingly or otherwise, which allows tobacco fraud to operate.

Mr Ross: I am sure that the whole House will find it disturbing that one in five packets of cigarettes sold in Northern Ireland is sourced illegally. Those counterfeit cigarettes are not subject to controls or regulations, and Treasury cannot collect any tax on them.

The Minister will be aware, I am sure, that there is a push nationally and locally, by some, to introduce plain packaging for tobacco products on health grounds. Does he share my concern that one of the unintended consequences of that could be that it makes it much easier for criminal gangs or organisations to produce and distribute counterfeit tobacco across Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I stress that plain packaging for tobacco is a matter for the Member's colleague, the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I do not wish to intrude in that area. However, from what I saw at an event that the OCTF ran for business groups last week, the quality of printing on counterfeit goods is of sufficient quality that I am not sure whether it is a significant deterrent at this stage.

Mr McDevitt: Can the Minister, in his capacity as the chair of the Organised Crime Task Force, confirm which paramilitary groups he believes are involved in the sale and distribution of counterfeit cigarettes and other illicit material?

Mr Ford: I do not suspect that Mr McDevitt expects that I have access to all the available intelligence in the same detail as he asked the question. However, it is certainly the case that a number of gangs involved in tobacco smuggling and counterfeit cigarette production have links with paramilitary groups, both republican and loyalist. That level of ongoing criminality and its involvement with those who pose a threat to the state in many different ways is clearly an issue of concern to this society.

Community Safety College

3. **Mr Wells** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the steps he has taken to ensure that local quarrying and construction companies have a fair opportunity to tender for building the Northern Ireland Community Safety College at Desertcreat. (AQO 2978/11-15)

Mr Ford: The investment of £139 million to build the Northern Ireland Community Safety College at Desertcreat represents a major investment and demonstrates the importance that the Northern Ireland Executive place on ensuring the safety of the whole community. For that reason, the Executive have included development of the college as part of their Programme for Government. The programme board and I have placed great importance on maximising the opportunities for local suppliers

of materials and businesses providing services, as for employment.

The programme board asked the designers to partner with a local design team to ensure that the local focus remained a high priority. They have done that, appointing Ostick and Williams of Belfast. All five teams competing for the main contractor role include major Northern Irish construction companies. The programme team is doing all that it can, within European procurement regulations, to ensure that local suppliers are positioned as favourably as possible in benefiting from the contract once it is let. The key is that local suppliers and potential subcontractors gear up to sell themselves to the winning main contractor.

It should be noted that, due to procurement rules, we cannot hold contractors to a specific Northern Ireland supplier if they can show that they can meet the same specification through another supplier. However, through factors such as sustainability obligations and cost of delivery, the winning main contractor should look at local suppliers in the first instance.

Mr Wells: The Justice Minister makes it all sound wonderful. The construction trade in mid-Ulster is on its knees, as it is throughout Northern Ireland. When the contract details stipulate that the stone must be either Donegal quartz or Kilkenny limestone, that hardly enables local quarriers or stonemasons in Northern Ireland to tender for the work. Why on earth have they been so specific? You are simply ruling out every quarrier and stonemason in Northern Ireland by stipulating a particular form of stone. Why not change the tender to read "any form of suitable stone", so that everyone can be on a level playing field?

Mr Ford: I appreciate that the Member has a particular interest in an area with certain quarries, and it is an issue that I have also followed through on. As I understand it, the relevant stone to provide the style of the buildings is not obtainable in Northern Ireland. Certain other stone, which he correctly named, is available in Northern Ireland, but there was, for example, significant difficulty in obtaining the basalt for the recent construction of the Giant's Causeway visitor centre, even to tie in with something as iconic as the Giant's Causeway. I also believe that the stone that has been specified for this contract, which is a very small part of the contract, is exactly the same as that which DHSSPS specified for the South West Acute Hospital.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. My apologies for missing my question. I was chairing the all-party working group on construction, which a number of Members attended. As a Member for Mid Ulster, I have a particular interest in this matter. The issue of subcontractors and suppliers comes up time and again. Can the Minister give me some indication about of the Department of Justice, in collaboration with Invest NI and local councils, can provide additional information on the tendering process to local suppliers and subbies, many of whom have been deeply hit by the Patton crisis?

2.45 pm

Mr Ford: I certainly appreciate the point about employment, which Mr McGlone has made previously. My understanding is that the programme board has organised or attended four meet-the-buyer events to allow local suppliers to have information about the project. It has provided various information via the college's website, desertcreatcollege.org; various other sites, such as Facebook; and the investment strategy portal, isni.gov.uk.

Details on the five teams that are competing for the main contractor role are also available on the website so that local suppliers and subcontractors can contact them. Information and assistance has been provided through Cookstown District Council to give local people the opportunity to engage. Of course, work has also been done to specify that there should be apprenticeships and people taken from the unemployment register to be employed on the contract. Significant work has been done, and it is now up to local businesses to take up the opportunities. I know that the programme board will be willing to assist in any way in which it can in getting that information out.

Mrs Overend: Can the Minister clarify whether any of the tenders that are going out from the college are available to smaller contractors or are all for large tenders?

Mr Ford: Tenders will not be put out in a way that will individually create opportunity for small local subcontractors. However, that is the whole point of ensuring that people are put in touch with the five teams that are currently in competition for the main contract. That will give local subcontractors the opportunity to engage their particular areas of expertise in line with normal policy.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far and his references to,

for instance, the social clauses for apprentices. Can he give some detail on what his Department's policy would be on capital contracts for, for instance, the long-term unemployed?

Mr Ford: I may have to write to Mr McLaughlin with the full details. However, the key issue, as far as I am concerned, is that we use the opportunities that we have to the maximum in order to specify that those who obtain contracts should provide apprenticeships and take people from the unemployment register. That input is relatively limited. However, given the economic conditions that pertain in Cookstown and mid-Ulster generally, the House would expect that we do all that we can to maximise it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has already been grouped.

Prison Service: Sickness Absences

5. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Justice what plans he has to improve the level of sickness absence within the Prison Service. (AQO 2980/11-15)

Mr Ford: In the past year, 2011-12, absence in the Prison Service totalled 14.4 days per member of staff. At present, the projected figure for 2012-13 is 12.3 days per member of staff against a Department target of 10.3 days. That having been said, I am not complacent about the progress that has been made to date. Every effort is being made to reduce the levels of absence further. Management is committed to continuing to work with staff and their trade unions to address the issue.

There is a variety of support mechanisms to assist staff who return to work after sickness.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he find the current absence levels acceptable?

Mr Ford: I do not think that anybody finds those absence levels acceptable. That is why significant work is being done. However, if we look at the particular issues that are addressed by prison officers and the particular difficulties that they have, and compare those levels with Civil Service averages, we see that they are not particularly higher. I think that it is accepted in the House that we wish to bring down the level of absence generally.

A number of different initiatives have been taken to reduce the figure. However, the fact is

that prison officers get assaulted on duty. Prison officers have a particular task to do, which may make it more difficult for them to work in particular circumstances than civil servants, who are regarded in the same way in the statistics but have a more conventional, predominantly desk-bound job.

We have to be realistic. We need to recognise the work that prison officers do, the tasks that they have to perform and the difficulties under which they sometimes work, while continuing to provide the necessary support and every incentive to get the figures down. As I said, they are above the Civil Service average. However, the key issue is to ensure that they go down in line with reductions in the Civil Service average, to which all Departments are committed.

Mr Campbell: The Minister referred to the Prison Service's target of 10.3 days. Does he accept that higher levels of sickness absence quite often have a domestic origin and can be affected by the threat level to prison officers and their families? Will he take that into account when looking at targets in the future, particularly given the very sad and unfortunate circumstances of the past six weeks?

Mr Ford: Clearly, Mr Campbell is absolutely right when he identifies the kinds of issues that can add to the problems people have at work, including stress from external threats. That is why management, I trust, is continuing to deal with matters sensitively. It is also why the work to ensure the best possible security arrangements are in place for prison officers, police officers and others, which we discussed earlier, is important.

We have to be realistic and accept that such levels of stress will exist because of the nature of that work as opposed to the work of, for example, sitting behind a desk and formulating policy. We somehow have to square the circle between recognising that difficulty and ensuring that we drive down stress and provide the maximum possible support for staff doing that difficult job.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. The Minister will be aware that part of the reform package was about a new culture, new work practices, etc. Are the new recruiting procedures designed to in any way combat the level of sickness absence in the Prison Service?

Mr Ford: I do not think that Mr Lynch's point is being addressed as such; this notion that there are specific procedures to address sickness absence among new recruits. The issue is to ensure that we deal with the problems affecting sickness absence among staff at all levels in whichever part of my Department they operate or, in this particular context, in whichever part of the Prison Service they are located. Obviously, the introduction of new members of staff, many of whom are younger, is likely to have a positive effect on sickness absence, if only because, as we all know, we tend to get sicker as we age.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Lunn is not in his position.

Victims of Crime

7. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Justice to outline any proposals to ensure that the representative or executor of a deceased victim of crime has the same rights as the victim had when alive. (AQO 2982/11-15)

Mr Ford: I am planning to bring forward a major programme of work to address the needs of victims and bereaved families, through a new five-year victim and witness strategy. Last month, I launched a public consultation on a draft strategy, which takes on board the findings of the Justice Committee's inquiry into services for victims and witnesses and recent inspection reports by Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, as well as direct feedback from victims and their representatives.

The death of a victim does not diminish the need for timely information and support to help a bereaved family or their representative deal with the consequences of a crime. The criminal justice process should not add to their distress unnecessarily. At present, when a victim dies, criminal justice agencies often work with a family representative, who may be the executor, to ensure that the victim's interests continue to be represented. The new strategy will ensure that there is greater parity between the entitlements of victims and those representing a bereaved family.

The code of practice for victims will be amended to ensure that the entitlements of bereaved families reflect those of other victims. Those entitlements will also be included in a victim charter, which will be legislated for in the faster, fairer justice Bill. I intend that the new entitlements will go further than those in some other jurisdictions and apply not only where the victim has died as a result of the crime but also when the victim subsequently passes away.

In addition, the new victim and witness care unit model that is currently being piloted will establish a single point of contact for victims and witnesses of crime and provide a more seamless service. That will include providing information for those attending court and updates on how a case is progressing. Improvements are also planned for the use of victim impact statements, including by bereaved families.

My Department will also undertake research on the criminal justice experience of those bereaved through murder, manslaughter or culpable road death.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree it is essential that justice be done for a deceased victim of crime in the same way that it would be for a living victim in our society?

Mr Ford: I agree with Mr Robinson that justice needs to be seen to be done for victims, including those who pass away either as a result of the crime or subsequent to that. That is why I highlighted the work done to engage with bereaved families, executors and others. I believe that we will make significant improvements by ensuring that the five-year victim and witness strategy is carried through.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí sin. Will the Minister take this opportunity to provide an update on the victim care unit in Belfast's Laganside Courts and tell us whether he has plans to roll out such units in other court buildings throughout the North?

Mr Ford: I think that Mr McCartney may find that, in a question directed at the needs of the representatives of victims who are deceased, it is perhaps a little bit difficult to include the work of the care unit, which deals with those who are currently there. I will certainly write to him to give him an update on the current position because, clearly, the good work being done in Laganside Courts needs to be extended to other courts, but I am not in a position to give him the detail of that at this point.

Prisons: Body Scanners

8. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the body scanner pilot schemes at Magilligan and Hydebank Wood. (AQO 2983/11-15)

Mr Ford: As I have previously announced, Prison Service officials have been taking forward work to implement recommendation 8 of the prison review team's final report. Two millimetre wave scanner pilots commenced in Magilligan prison and Hydebank Wood young offenders centre on 26 September and 24 October respectively. Both pilots will run for three months.

During this three-month evaluation period, the effectiveness and appropriateness of this technology will be measured against our existing search procedures. Until these pilots have been completed, it will not be possible to provide an assessment of the suitability of this technology for use in the prison environment or a timescale for their potential introduction to Maghaberry prison.

I can, however, report today that the Prison Service has progressed its own application to seek approval for the use of transmission X-ray scanners in prison establishments in Northern Ireland, and Members may wish to know that, as the justifying authority, I expect to receive the Prison Service's application by the end of this week. It will be submitted and registered for consideration through the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC). In the interim, my officials have commenced the required consultation process, and they met representatives of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) on 22 November.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The Minister will note, of course, that I was in my place when called to ask the question. Nonetheless, can I press him for a more specific timeline for the installation of the body scanner in Maghaberry prison? Will he guarantee that it will happen as soon as possible, because it has been talked about for months now, and I would like him to be more specific about the timeline?

Mr Ford: I was going to say that I was delighted to see that Mr McElduff had made it to his place in time to ask his question. However, given that, in my statement yesterday, I answered a very similar question, which he may not have heard, I am not sure that I welcome the opportunity to repeat it.

The position with regard to the transmission X-ray process, which is being considered for use at Maghaberry, is that it is something that has not been used in any prison in the United Kingdom. Therefore, it has to go through a full justification process under the Justification of Practices Involving Ionising Radiation

Regulations 2004. No other Department in any of the four nations of the UK has experience of doing that, and, therefore, we cannot give any conceivable timescale for how long that justification process will take after we engage with DECC.

What I can say is that, in the context of the work that has been done by the Prison Service in recent weeks, there has been a considerable speeding up of the process, both in running the pilots with the millimetre wave scanners in the other two institutions and in putting together the paperwork to look at the use of transmission X-rays. I believe that that is an indication of good faith on the part of the Prison Service, which I am committed to supporting and continuing to push to see that we get the best possible system that will provide better arrangements for prisoners and prison staff than the current arrangements for full-body searching. However, what is absolutely necessary is that we ensure that we get it right and that we continue to provide safety and security for prisoners and prison staff and the wider society. We have to get it right rather than get it quickly.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his detailed answer in relation to the scanning equipment. Given that the no-wash dispute involving a substantial number of prisoners has come to an end, does that not give you, Minister, the opportunity to expedite all the operational matters that need to be attended to in order to bring this dispute, finally, to an end?

3.00 pm

Mr Ford: I appreciate the fact that Mr Maginness highlighted the ending of the dirty protest by a majority of the separated republican prisoners in Roe House. As I understand it, the number of prisoners still on protest is now in single figures.

A key recommendation from the prison review team was that we ensured that we provided an alternative to full-body searching for all prisoners in all three institutions. It was not an issue only for Roe House or for the separated loyalists in Bush House. On that basis, we continue to make progress for the benefit of all prisoners.

The Member hints at other issues about the regime that applies to the separated republicans who were on protest and, therefore, did not benefit from the full opportunities they would have had had they conformed to prison rules. Maghaberry management is taking those

issues into account to ensure that we normalise the situation as best we can.

A lot of physical work remains to be done to repair the infrastructure in Roe House, where damage was done. That is being attended to. Although it is important and necessary to do that, it is a different issue to providing alternatives to full-body searching. We should not focus too much on the issue of separated prisoners, although that is important in a different context.

Assembly Business

Mr A Maginness: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. As you know, I rose for a point of order earlier, and you ruled me out of order at that point in time. However, the same issue arises, and I bring to your attention the fact that, during questions to the First and deputy First Minister, the First Minister said that the question that I had tabled had been transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

That came as a surprise to me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and you indicated that it also came as a surprise to the Chair. I would like the Chair to investigate the matter because it is a topical question about EU funding. EU funding is being determined at this time, and the question related to Peace IV. The question is of the moment, and it is important that it be answered. It seems to me that the First Minister was ill-informed in relation to the transfer. I cannot prejudge, but the matter should be properly investigated.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I give you an assurance that we will investigate why the question was transferred and when it will be answered. However, we had no indication at all at the Table that the question had been transferred.

Mr McNarry: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. On a similar subject, I apologise to the House for my absence during Question Time. I accept the rebuke. I do not think that it is anybody's place to rebuke me or anybody else if they are the deputy First Minister, but I want to make that position clear. I did not think that question 11 would be reached, and I was absent with a reason but not an excuse. I trust that I will be indulged with a written answer to my question.

Mr Nesbitt: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Two Ulster Unionist Members were not in their places during Question Time. They were serving on the newly formed Ad Hoc Committee for the Welfare Reform Bill. The party took all reasonable steps to inform the Business Office that those Members would be absent. As the Members requested written answers in lieu of oral questioning, I believe that the deputy First Minister was wrong to allege that preparatory work by officials will be wasted. It will not be wasted.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Again, we had no indication at the Table that the questions

had been withdrawn or that the Members would not be in their places. As for preparatory work, during Question Time, all Ministers have a list of questions and answers. If something happens, that can become disjointed and create problems.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Further to the first point of order, it is interesting that the Minister of Finance was on his feet at Question Time yesterday. If the question was transferred, was there a missed opportunity on the ministerial side?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have to investigate exactly where that sits at present. It is not on the list for today.

Private Members' Business

Transport: EU Funding for 2014-2020

Debate resumed on amendments to motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work in partnership with the Irish Government to advance the "pre-identified" projects list for inclusion in the next round of EU funding for 2014-2020. — [Mr Lynch.]

Which amendments were:

(1) Leave out all after "Development" and insert:

"to work with his counterparts in the Irish, Scottish, Welsh and British Governments in seeking the maximum amount of EU funding available for transport; and further calls on the European Commission to recognise Northern Ireland's variance in terms of transport needs and existing infrastructure." — [Mr Dickson.]

(2) At end insert:

“; and, under the auspices of the NSMC transport sector, which has responsibility for reviewing and updating the transport policy for the island, to co-ordinate the transport aspects of EU cross-border programmes and develop plans for specific cross-border transport projects.” — [Mr Dallat.]

Mr Allister: It will probably not come as a surprise to the House that I have a rather different take on the motion than most of those who have spoken to date.

We, as citizens of the United Kingdom, should examine regional funding in the EU very carefully. The reality is that it is our money that we are looking to recover. That flows from the fact that the United Kingdom is a huge net contributor to the EU budget. There are limited portions of that budget from which we are entitled to recover funding. One of those relates to regional funding. However, when that funding comes back, it is not Europe's money or money that someone else has given to subsidise the United Kingdom — far from it — it is our own money that is returned, but with all sorts of constraints on it. We pay in that money, and Europe takes it upon itself to put conditions on how it can be spent, where it can be spent, where it will go and all sorts of other burdens. We are meant to be grateful and to speak about the largesse of the European

Union in being so gracious as to give us back some, but only some, of our money. At the end of that budgetary process, we are still a huge net loser because our net contribution runs to billions of pounds. So I am not one of those who fawn over the generosity of the European Union. It is a fake generosity; it is a generosity with someone else's money. In most cases, it is with our money.

The transport strategy is, by and large, an ill-conceived strategy from our perspective in the European Union. It is premised on a grand design that does not fit, suit or accommodate whatsoever the needs of a small community such as Northern Ireland. It is premised on notions of accentuating to the ultimate degree the removal of freight from the road and on to rail. That is patently unsuitable for Northern Ireland. It is premised on European highways, which, patently, are largely unsuited to part of an island.

I am one of those who very strongly say that rather than chasing, with some sort of begging bowl, funds of a regional nature from the European Union, we should front up and say that regional policy is one of those policies that should be repatriated from the European Union to the member states. That would allow us to take of our own volition our own money and spend it as suits our needs rather than it being siphoned through a process in which much of it is diverted elsewhere, and the money that comes back does so laden with conditions such that it is largely useless to us.

The motion is particularly futile. It does not grasp the nettle of the real detriment to a nation such as the United Kingdom in terms of regional aid. It would be far better addressing the basics. Instead of chasing around and lamenting the fact that the make-up of the policy means that it could not contain the sorts of things that some look for, we should face the bigger issue and recognise that regional policy should be repatriated from the EU. Indeed, our whole membership should be repatriated out of the EU. We would be far better out and standing on our own feet.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I thank Members for their contributions and note the comments and points that they made. I welcome the opportunity to provide some clarification on the motion and to address the proposed amendments. In addition, I will do my best to address the points raised by Members. However, I may need to revert to Members on some points with correspondence after the debate.

I think that, at the outset, it would be useful to provide some background. The pre-identified projects list is included in the European Commission's draft regulation on the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF). That regulation and the Commission's regulation on the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) are currently going through ordinary legislative procedure, otherwise known as the co-decision process. That is a process whereby the European Parliament and Council will debate and consider the Commission's proposals and arrive at an agreed position.

Members will be aware that I have taken a very keen interest in the ongoing negotiations on these regulations. Although I am supportive of the UK's negotiating position on the regulations, there are also regional concerns and issues that need to be addressed. In order to address those issues, I and my officials have been engaging with our own UK Government, the Dublin Government, the European Commission and the European Parliament.

In response to Mr Dickson's comments, I would like to inform the House that we have, in fact, secured a number of amendments to the regulations at European Council level. Those include an exemption for isolated networks from rail infrastructure standards. That exemption will save significant unnecessary expenditure. However, we now need those amendments, and more, to be reflected in the European Parliament's consideration of the regulations. It is for that reason that I have been lobbying the European Parliament on these issues. I have worked with Northern Ireland MEPs — I thank them for that — to table amendments for consideration by the Parliament's Transport Committee.

I will return to the original motion. As the negotiations on the Connecting Europe Facility are ongoing and the regulation is in draft form, I cannot currently take a definitive view on the original motion's call:

"to work in partnership with the Irish Government to advance the 'pre-identified' projects list for inclusion in the next round of EU funding for 2014-2020."

Furthermore, the projects list does not currently identify any specific projects for our TEN-T network. Instead, it refers to the upgrading of the rail network on the pre-identified section of the core corridor from Dublin to Belfast. In addition, I wish to see opportunities for road projects to be included on the list. However, I must caveat that by stating that, until there is more clarity around national and regional

capital budgets moving into the next Budget period, definitive assurance that specific projects will proceed cannot be provided. In short, the regulations are still in draft form and the projects list is not yet final.

In response to the comments of Mr Dallat, who is no longer in his place, let me make it clear, as my party colleague Sandra Overend reflected, that the regulation is in draft form and that, at this stage, the projects identified are only indicative. In fact, member states, including the UK and the Republic of Ireland, were keen to stress to the Commission, when asked to identify projects, that definitive assurance on the projects list could not be provided until the TEN-T and CEF regulations were finalised. Therefore, at this time, my focus is on trying to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland by influencing the negotiations and pressing home the need for regional variances to be accounted for. I can assure the House that I will continue to work on that with our MEPs, our UK Government and the Irish Government.

While I agree with Mr Lynch, the Deputy Chair of the Regional Development Committee, that the Irish have been very successful in securing funding from Europe for transport projects, I must point out that my Department, the Department for Regional Development (DRD), has also been successful in attracting European funding. Indeed, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) recognised that fact and recently wrote to my Department to highlight DRD's commitment and approach to competitive EU funding as an example for other Departments to follow.

3.15 pm

To date, we have secured over €18 million of funding from the TEN-T programme and nearly €9 million from the INTERREG IV programme. In addition, my officials recently submitted three applications for TEN-T funding. Those applications were for funding towards a feasibility study as part of the development of the design of a grade-separated junction at the York Street interchange; funding towards the Coleraine to Londonderry rail line relay project; and funding, as part of a joint application with the Electricity Supply Board from the Republic of Ireland, for the Plugged-In Places initiative. A further multi-annual call for TEN-T funding is expected later this year, and, if the call criteria are suitable, my officials will submit further funding applications.

As I have reassured the House already, I will not, and nor should the Executive, overlook the

importance of engaging with Europe to influence policy. In that regard, we could work with and learn from both the UK and Irish Governments and make best use of the opportunity provided by the Barroso task force. The work that the Executive have initiated with regard to the task force and improving our engagement in Europe will help us to succeed in that regard.

In relation to Mr Dickson and Mr McCarthy's proposed amendment to the motion, as I have stated, I have been working with my counterparts from the UK Government and the Irish Government to secure the best possible outcome for Northern Ireland from the ongoing negotiations. In addition, my officials have been liaising with officials from the other devolved Administrations on areas of shared interest, such as the inclusion of the A75 from Stranraer to Carlisle on the TEN-T core network.

Although policy concerning the EU budget is a reserved matter, as a devolved Administration, we have an interest in EU budget expenditure and the UK's receipts. The points made by the last Member to speak in the debate, Mr Allister, were largely political and concentrated on the major issue being reviewed — the UK's membership of the EU — whilst stressing regional variation.

I am mindful of the UK's position and the concerns regarding the Commission's proposals on the budget size for 2014 to 2020. However, I am supportive of the concept of a Connecting Europe Facility and the level of funding proposed for it. It is therefore important that, whilst seeking to limit the impact of the overall EU budget, every effort is made to ensure that any increased budgetary contribution is countered by increased opportunities to avail of the Connecting Europe Facility budget, particularly for transport, which is the most significant element in that budget.

I have lobbied extensively, and I will continue to lobby, for regional variances being taken into account by the TEN-T proposals when it comes to existing infrastructure systems and transport needs. I have met the European Commission and the European Transport Commissioner, and I welcome the proposed amendment for the House to support my efforts in that regard. In fact, as some Members know, I am planning to travel to Brussels immediately after this debate to attend a TEN-T Connect to Compete event, which will also be attended by the Transport Commissioner, Mr Kallas, MPs, ministerial counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and other Ministers and key stakeholders. I am

grateful that the House has made progress in the timing of the debate. It would have been deeply ironic if I had been stuck in Belfast talking about Europe instead of being in Brussels actively pursuing opportunities for Northern Ireland in Europe.

In regard to Mr Dallat and Mr Eastwood's proposed amendment to the motion, the issues concerning TEN-T and the Connecting Europe Facility were discussed during the North/South Ministerial Council transport sectoral meeting in October this year. Furthermore, we agreed at the meeting to continue to liaise on relevant issues in the coming months. I can also advise that my Department has engaged with the Special EU Programmes Body on the development of the next EU cross-border programme, INTERREG V.

Mr Ó hOisín raised the issue of connectivity in the north-west, specifically the possibility of a western arc route. From a TEN-T perspective, we need to try to negotiate the inclusion of Londonderry on the core network in the first instance, as that will improve the opportunity for TEN-T funding to be secured for projects on all connecting routes to Londonderry.

In summary, I welcome the debate and thank Members for their contributions. I note that, if amendment No 1 succeeds, amendment No 2 will fall. I restate my commitment to ensuring that the maximum contribution is gained from Europe for the benefit of our transport system and our people generally.

Mr Eastwood: The debate has been largely positive, which is welcome. European funding, particularly for infrastructure, is a very important issue for the House, especially for the Members from the north-west.

Quite fortuitously, 'The Irish Times' published a poll today on people's impression of Ireland's continuing involvement in the EU. A total of 74%, which is the vast majority, said that they were very happy for Ireland to remain a member of the European Union. I think that that says it all. Ireland has gone through immense economic turmoil, and Europe is going through very difficult times, yet the people of Ireland still want to be part of the European Union and still recognise its value. That is illustrated nowhere better than in the infrastructure across this island, particularly on the southern side of the border. All that you have to do is drive down any one of the brand spanking new roads in the Republic of Ireland where you will see the European Union's flag on the signs beside it. I think that we can learn

about that from the Republic of Ireland, but we have just not been very good at doing that.

If you look at any map of Ireland, you will see that two things are missing from the north-west corner: a motorway and a railway line. We in the north-west have been greatly disadvantaged when you consider that, 100 or more years ago, Ireland had the most extensive rail network per capita in the world. Unfortunately, that was ripped up due to a very ill-advised government policy. We need to redress that imbalance and ensure that the north-west of this country is no longer disadvantaged because of our lack of infrastructure.

I thank the Minister for all his work to date. It is clear that he is committed to increasing the levels of European funding for this part of the world. The Executive have not been good at doing that, and I think that everybody needs to be much more focused on drawing down EU funding. The Minister has done good work on the infrastructure side of things. He has a lot more to do, and that is why we have asked him to further engage with the North/South Ministerial Council transport sector.

Like other Members who spoke, we believe that the western corridor of this country needs to be serviced by a rail network. We are very much disadvantaged by the fact that tourists cannot get a train further up the west coast to Derry. That is not a good thing. So, I encourage not only the Minister for Regional Development but all Ministers to continue the work of engaging with Europe and to learn the lessons from the Irish Republic and from all the work that has been done there thus far.

I take this opportunity to congratulate John Dallat and those who are involved in the Into the West railway group for the effort that they have put into securing the Derry to Belfast railway line, which was under threat a number of years ago. We need to move that debate even further and bring it to a point where we are not just securing the railway line but are enhancing it and increasing the number of tracks going to different areas and more places.

I am grateful for the positive nature of the debate. It is strange to have so many pro-Europeans in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I think that some parties in the House have a bit of a schizophrenic relationship with the European Union. Along with the British Prime Minister, the DUP is calling for a smaller European budget, but the First Minister is calling for an increase in our drawdown of European funds. Sinn Féin has voted against

every major piece of integration on this island with the European Union, but it is very proud, and rightly so, of the money that has been drawn down for community groups and other projects.

Therefore, I hope that the debate and the positive experiences that the South and many community groups in the North have had in engaging with the European Union will encourage political parties in the House to continue on their path —

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

Mr Eastwood: — towards a pro-European stance like that which the SDLP has had for many years. Hopefully, we can then engage more positively with Europe to ensure that our infrastructure and other parts of our economy can be better serviced.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the opportunity to speak to amendment No 1 and the motion, which look at how the Executive, and the Minister for Regional Development in particular, can best secure EU funding to improve transport investment in Northern Ireland.

In proposing the motion for Sinn Féin, Seán Lynch stressed the need for the Minister to work in partnership with his counterpart in the Irish Government, and he advised the Assembly of the ongoing need to raise awareness among EU officials of the geographical location of the island of Ireland. I had not realised that we were still at that stage, so, as well as raising the need for European investment, that served as a helpful reminder.

In proposing the SDLP amendment, John Dallat spoke of the need for cross-border co-operation, particularly with the North/South Ministerial Council, to improve road, rail and air transport provision on the island, as well as the need to deliver the vision of transport spanning from one end of Europe to the other. We have also just heard Colum Eastwood speak about that vision, particularly the need for that to extend right to the north-west of Ireland.

In proposing the Alliance amendment, my colleague Stewart Dickson broadened the approach to the issue to one of ensuring that all major Governments on these islands work together to pursue all EU funding to improve transport connectivity and provision in Britain and Ireland. I welcome the support that was voiced for the amendment.

He also spoke about the particular focus that we need to have on connected transport to ensure that we are competitive on a global scale so that we can access markets and the movement of skilled labour to create territorial social cohesion. He said that achieving that was a key factor in economic growth and improved quality of life for people in Northern Ireland. Mr Dickson also agreed with Seán Lynch on the need to ensure that European officials comprehend Northern Ireland's unique circumstances. Indeed, he spoke of the work that the Regional Development Committee and the Minister are doing to make sure that that is achieved.

In relation to the Irish Government and the North/South Ministerial Council, this issue may be worth putting on the agenda of the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association. The Alliance Party certainly recognises that close co-operation of that nature is needed to deliver on the issue. Indeed, my colleague Stewart Dickson spoke of the many transport corridors in the UK and Ireland, including Cork-Dublin-Belfast and Liverpool-Manchester-Birmingham-London. He also spoke of the need to be aware of the importance of Scottish and Welsh ports to people in Northern Ireland.

Sandra Overend of the Ulster Unionist Party supported the Alliance Party amendment and recognised the need for co-operation across the Governments in these islands, as did Alex Easton, who also spoke of the need to balance rail and road investment, particularly given the rural nature of the population in Northern Ireland. Jim Allister actually made the same point, after saying that the motion was pointless. Nevertheless, he made a useful point in his contribution.

Cathal Ó hOisín spoke about transport being extremely relevant to the future prosperity of the continent. He said that the argument articulated by my colleague Stewart Dickson had persuaded him to support the Alliance position. He also advised us of the significance of County Mayo to those of us who enjoy Coca Cola in the North. I am very grateful for the transportation of that particular product from that part of the country.

3.30 pm

The Minister, who we have recognised is working to influence the UK negotiating position on this issue, advised us that he is working with the Dublin Government as well and has secured amendments in relation to regional variants in Northern Ireland. I also welcome the fact that he has accessed EU funding that has

had direct benefit for citizens in Belfast, Coleraine and Derry, and that he has done cross-border work in relation to electricity. We wish him well on his travels today to Europe to ensure that we secure even further funding for transport in Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, it is clear from the debate today that the quality of our and our neighbours' transport services matter significantly to Northern Ireland's economic and social well-being and that all Governments on these islands need to speak with a united voice —

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

Mr Lyttle: — if European officials are to understand our unique position and we are to maximise European investment in our transport services.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. In concluding the debate, I remind Members that we are talking about a funding package for TEN-T in the region of €49 billion, which my colleague Sean Lynch referred to. He also referred to the benefits of TEN-T for the island of Ireland. He made the point that the island of Ireland does not feature on the pre-identified lists that are currently in draft form in the EU. He conveyed his own personal experience of going to Brussels and the fact that they had very little knowledge of this part of the world. In fact, they thought it was connected to mainland Europe. He expressed his fear that, if the island of Ireland, particularly the most westerly part of Ireland — which is the most westerly area of the EU — is not part of the core network then the country as a whole will suffer and we will be left behind, particularly as the new accession states come into the EU and expand it.

The motion called for the Minister to work with counterparts in Dublin to maximise opportunity for the EU structure funds. There is a golden opportunity coming up now, with the fact that Ireland is about to assume the EU presidency, so this is the time that we should maximise those opportunities and any influence that we might be able to bring to bear.

Stewart Dickson, speaking on amendment No 1, referred to the fact that there is a very competitive environment and that it is important that we in the North have access to markets. He expressed a fear that TEN-T could force us to implement a transport infrastructure that may not be suitable for this part of the island. He also referred to the fact that EU expansion will

increase competition. Again, like Sean, he mentioned the lack of knowledge that he experienced when he went to Brussels as well. Stewart called on the House to speak with one voice. One of the things that he called for was east-west connectivity as well as within the island. We do not have an issue with that. As Cathal rightly said, he was taken over by Stewart's comments and he is all for that amendment. In fact, one of the things that provoked the motion was that our colleague Martina Anderson proposed an amendment to the pre-identified projects in the EU. Part of that proposition makes reference not only to the western arc but to the Galway-Edinburgh rail upgrade, the Dublin-Cork-Southampton and the Cardiff-Bristol-London rail studies. We have no issues with the east-west dimension.

John Dallat spoke on amendment No 2. He is one of the MLAs here who is old enough to remember the golden era of rail travel throughout the island of Ireland. He welcomed the motion and said that there is a lot to be gained, especially the elimination of bottlenecks. He said that there is great work carried out by the Northern Corridor Railways Group, which indicated a very intelligent way forward. Of course, he flagged up the benefits of that and the all-Ireland benefits of getting a transport infrastructure that would enable us to compete in the world market.

He criticised the previous Minister for Regional Development for not doing enough to secure EU funds, but it is important to point out that Mr Dallat was a member of the DRD scrutiny Committee in the previous mandate. Obviously, there was not a great deal of work done by the Regional Development Committee, that let the Minister, allegedly, to slip up on EU funds.

Ian McCrea spoke next, and he said that the Sinn Féin motion was short-sighted. He went on to say that he could not support it because the train would not go through Cookstown and Mid Ulster but then welcomed the Alliance Party amendment. He deviated into the regional development strategy and questioned the benefits of TEN-T for Mid Ulster, but he did mention the importance of tourism and investment. I could say that the train will not go through Omagh or Loughmacrory, but we need to look at the big picture, which is that such a core network would lift everybody's boat and benefit the entire country, North and South.

Mrs Overend said that, while negotiations were ongoing, the motion was premature. She said that it was important to ensure that the North was not left behind. Surely this is the time to

debate such a motion. If the negotiations are ongoing and there is a draft list out to invite projects, this is the time to debate the motion and get them on.

Alex Easton referred to the importance of proper infrastructure for economic development. He referred to the multitransport modes and said that the current transport infrastructure in the North was very fractured. He said that the rail infrastructure was very poor but there should be more investment in roads. He referred to the work with other Governments to reduce regional variations. Interestingly, he said that this was the usual Sinn Féin all-Ireland agenda, but we have no problem with east-west connections. He should have spoken to Simon Coveney, who addressed the DUP and fheis at the weekend. If we had a proper rail network, Simon could have come from his constituency in Cork and up the western arc to the conference, handier than having to negotiate his way up through the bad road infrastructure.

Cathal Ó hOisín, like John Dallat, remembered the golden era of the rail network throughout the country and, indeed, throughout Europe. He spoke of the benefits of the western arc for commerce, tourism, economic revival, climate change and many other reasons. Jim Allister, as the Minister said, made a political point about withdrawing from the EU. He said that funding for roads should be handled locally and that we should repatriate everything from the EU.

The Minister made particular reference to regional concerns and the fact that he had been working with other Governments and the EU. He said that the regulations were in draft form and the projects were only indicative at this stage. Again, that feeds into the point that, if the propositions are indicative at this stage — there are as many as 400 proposed amendments to the pre-identified projects — this is the time for us to work hard to make sure that we are included.

The Minister pledged to work to do his best for the North and was very mindful of the need for an acknowledgement of regional variation. He referred to the projects that they have successfully achieved TEN-T funding for and noted that a call will be made later this year for TEN-T funds. He supported the Connecting Europe Facility and has met the Commission and others to talk about regional variations. Indeed, it features in the North/South Ministerial Council's discussions as well.

Colum Eastwood made the winding-up speech on amendment No 2. He referred to the poll in

'The Irish Times', which said that 74% of people wanted to stay in the EU. He talked about the fact that the north-west had no decent motorway or railway and said that we must improve our ability to draw down EU funds, just as the South of Ireland has been successful — more successful, perhaps, than we are — in drawing down transport funds. He said that the Minister was broadly doing a good job.

Chris Lyttle reiterated the views of his colleague Stewart Dickson. He proposed that the matter should be put on the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association's agenda and said that all the Governments must speak with a united voice. As I said, we have no issue with everyone speaking with a united voice on this issue. He drew back on a comment that Seán Lynch made at the outset, which was that 30% of Coca-Cola in the world comes from County Mayo. One of the things that we picked up in a meeting that we had with some of the chambers of commerce in that western part of the world was that 100% of Botox comes from there as well.

We hope that our motion will gain as much support as possible across the House. It is about taking a golden opportunity that exists to tap into a €49 billion pot to improve rail infrastructure. We deliberately timed the motion for when the issue was ongoing, with the Irish Government due to hold the EU presidency from January until June next year, which will maximise our leverage over there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that, if that amendment is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2, as the wording of the original motion will have been changed to such an extent that it would not be in order for the House to vote on it as well.

Question, That amendment No 1 be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Regional Development to work with his counterparts in the Irish, Scottish, Welsh and British Governments in seeking the maximum amount of EU funding available for transport; and further calls on the European Commission to recognise Northern Ireland's variance in terms of transport needs and existing infrastructure.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

St Lucia Site, Omagh

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. There will be no ministerial response.

Mr Hussey: I thank Members for their presence this afternoon for the debate on St Lucia Barracks in Omagh. As a West Tyrone representative and a very proud son of Omagh, I am delighted to have secured a debate on the town I love so well — apologies to Phil Coulter. My family association with St Lucia Barracks goes back to 1923, when my grandfather, a soldier with the Royal Irish Fusiliers, was sent on his last posting to St Lucia Barracks in Omagh, when he was attached to the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers. From there, was discharged with 21 years' service in 1926. So my family connection with Omagh began with St Lucia Barracks. Perhaps that is why Members have abandoned the Chamber.

The story of St Lucia Barracks starts in 1875 with the leasing of the lands from the Archdale family on a 999-year lease as a military barracks. Barracks have been positioned on the site since the early 1880s. The site is one of the most impressive Victorian structures anywhere in the British Isles, and, as it was occupied by the army in various guises over its history, the historic buildings were well maintained until the withdrawal of the Royal Irish Regiment in 2007. Since then, the barracks have been closed to the public, and only limited maintenance has been undertaken.

I visited the barracks recently, and the site is as impressive as ever. Without a doubt, the impressive walled barracks are an asset to Omagh, with a strong link to many families who reside in Omagh to this day. The memorial in the barracks walls to those who died during their tour of foreign service lists the names of those whose last military posting before going overseas was St Lucia Barracks, and their last sight of Ireland before departing would have been within the walled barracks. Those names — Roman Catholic and Protestant — have helped to make Omagh, the county town of Tyrone, what it is today.

My reason for securing a debate now is simple: I do not want to see West Tyrone — Omagh, specifically — lose the jewel in the crown. St Lucia Barracks is one of the military sites that was to be gifted to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). There have been legal complications with the covenant on the lease, but I understand from the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and from the Minister, the Rt Hon Andrew Robathan MP, that negotiations are nearing completion and that the MoD will soon be in a position to offer the site to OFMDFM. There is no if, but or maybe, but in correspondence to me, the Minister stated:

"My department is currently negotiating with the freeholders on the retained part of St Lucia and once a resolution is found, the site will be offered to the OFMDFM under the Good Friday Agreement."

I have concerns that OFMDFM might not be as keen for the site to be in public ownership as I am. I refer Members to responses that my party leader, Mike Nesbitt, and I have received in written answers to questions on St Lucia Barracks. Mike Nesbitt asked:

"(i) whether ownership of St Lucia Barracks, Omagh is to be passed from the Ministry of Defence; (ii) whether they are planning for the Ministry of Defence to gift the site to their Department; and (iii) what future use do they envisage for the former military site."

OFMDFM responded:

"On 15 April 2012, part of St Lucia Barracks was gifted to OFMDFM under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. The listed buildings and parade ground at St Lucia remain the property of the Ministry of Defence (MOD). It has not been possible for the MOD to transfer that part of the site to OFMDFM for legal reasons, although we understand that discussions are ongoing in relation to this and that MOD hopes to resolve the difficulties."

OFMDFM officials will maintain contact with the owners of the listed part of the site, so that any options which involve both portions of the site can be explored."

The purpose of the gifting sites under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement is to raise capital revenue to meet Executive pressures. Officials are currently considering options for disposal of the site to maximise yield and in the short to medium term are

looking at ways to minimise costs and achieve some financial or social return. OFMDFM has established a Strategic Sites Oversight Board to undertake strategic management of the former military sites owned by the department and this will make recommendations to the Departmental Board and Ministers in due course in relation to the future of the sites."

3.45 pm

I asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister:

"(i) to detail the current status in relation to the gifting of the St Lucia Barracks in Omagh; (ii) whether they have been involved in discussions with the Ministry of Defence in relation to the gifting of this site to the Executive; and (iii) the expected date that the negotiations between the leaseholders and Ministry of Defence will be completed."

I was advised:

"OFMDFM currently owns a portion of the St Lucia Barracks site consisting of open ground, workshops and former military housing, which was gifted by the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in 2011 under the Hillsborough Castle Agreement. The remainder of the site was not gifted because of legal impediments.

OFMDFM officials have maintained contact with MOD in relation to the legal discussions on the remainder of the site, and possible future scenarios, but without any commitment on either side.

The legal negotiations are a matter for MOD rather than OFMDFM and we understand these are still a matter for due process."

My last question was:

"whether departmental officials have undertaken any preliminary discussions with officials from Omagh District Council in relation to the potential use of St Lucia Barracks; and whether officials have been in discussion with the Department for Social Development, since the completion of the Omagh Town Centre Masterplan in 2009, in relation to the development of this site."

I was advised:

"OFMDFM officials have undertaken discussions with Omagh District Council and the Department for Social Development in relation to St Lucia Barracks. These discussions have included consideration of the St Lucia site itself, the links to the neighbouring Lisanelly site and the context of St Lucia in the wider development of Omagh Town Centre.

Officials will continue to liaise with the Council, DSD and any other stakeholders on the future of the site."

Unfortunately, we do not seem to have a clear vision of what will happen.

My concerns relate specifically to the walled barracks, on which, I understand, negotiations are almost complete. We must ensure that the barracks are taken into public ownership, and we must lobby hard to ensure that we support the master plan put forward by Omagh District Council. Of the six West Tyrone MLAs, five of us have been councillors on Omagh District Council, and Councillor Buchanan remains in that role. Councillor Buchanan MLA is not here this evening, but he has asked me to make it clear to the Assembly that he supports my proposals for the retention of St Lucia Barracks in public ownership and as part of the Omagh District Council plan.

The master plan clearly envisages St Lucia Barracks as essential to the development of Omagh, and I quote directly from the document:

"The Churches area dominates the high ground in Omagh with the distinctive skyline of the courthouse and spires and a network of narrow streets. It is proposed that the masterplan builds upon this unique character incorporating the former barracks of St Lucia and encouraging a cultural part of Omagh to develop, becoming an ideal location for restaurants, specialist retail, tourist attractions and accommodation.

The Churches area and the former barracks at St Lucia are two of the most historically significant parts of Omagh and have an important role to play in the vision for the future of Omagh.

Cultural uses such as small museums and galleries should be encouraged to the area, benefiting from its rich history and architectural legacy, whilst adding increased levels of physical and socio-economic activity to the area. These would complement existing attractions such as the churches themselves, whilst helping to

create increased footfall for cafes, restaurants and bars."

We have seen what can be done in Londonderry, where Ebrington Barracks, with great support from the Executive, became the open site it is today. Omagh needs the support of the Executive and a no-quibble guarantee that the site will be gifted to the people of Omagh. The development of the site in Omagh should be a priority to ensure that Omagh will continue to be a major town in the south-west. The site cannot be sold to the highest bidder; it must be developed by Omagh District Council in co-operation with various Departments. The blueprint is in place from Ebrington, and the Omagh master plan can be developed further. I urge OFMDFM to ensure that Omagh gets the same support as was given to our second city.

I refer Members to the position of Omagh District Council, which is clearly documented, and I will quote directly its position:

"The council remains united as to the strategic importance of the St Lucia site for the future growth and development of Omagh town and the wider subregion. Its regeneration potential is unrivalled and the site's proximity to Omagh town will enable real and meaningful linkages to the town centre to be established and developed. There has been no meaningful progress on the status of the restrictive use covenant for at least two years. The master plan remains unpublished, and there appears to be no central government interest in progressing the development of the site. The council is concerned at the absence of any real strategic direction in relation to St Lucia. The timescale for agreeing a new civic headquarters is slipping and there is now a need for urgent decisions to be taken. Presumably, if the restrictive covenant is removed, there is a risk that the site could be disposed to a developer or consortium which is unsympathetic to the site and its importance for Omagh and Tyrone. Clearly this would be an unfavourable outcome. The council remains committed to the development of the site and is willing, with appropriate central government guidance and support, to take a lead role in ensuring that the site is developed for the social, economic and regeneration benefit of the people of Omagh and the wider subregion."

Earlier, we heard the First Minister refer to Fermanagh and other sites in Northern Ireland. It is clear that Omagh and this site have the potential to be developed, and we, as an Assembly, must push this issue as hard as we

can to ensure that we do not lose this asset. The solution is simple. We call on OFMDFM to bring the matter to a swift conclusion, once the covenant issue is resolved, by stating unequivocally that St Lucia Barracks will be brought into the ownership of OFMDFM and, in conjunction with Omagh District Council, those buildings will be brought back to life as a major facility and attraction for the benefit of the people of Omagh.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. My comments follow what Ross said. Members are aware that the St Lucia site in Omagh is a 45-acre site. It is a gem right in the heart of Omagh, with a lot of cultural and historical significance. It is one of the sites which, unfortunately, was not gifted as part of the package when the Lisanelly site, which adjoins it, was gifted to the Executive. It is now being developed as a shared education campus.

There is some housing on the site, which is not in the best of shape. Some of it is on a floodplain and cannot be used for future development. As Ross says, the stumbling block is the military covenant. There is a restriction in it governing use, particularly for the listed buildings, which are on a six-acre plot on the site. I understand that the covenant requires that the site must be used solely for military purposes; should that not be the case, the site defaults to its original owners. I am glad to note that, even though we have this logjam, the NI Environment Agency has taken steps in recent times to preserve the listed buildings on the site.

Mr Hussey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Go ahead.

Mr Hussey: I will clarify the specific point in relation to the military covenant: it is that that the MoD is buying out, and it has got to the stage where it has nearly completed its negotiations. It is the covenant that is the problem at this time. The MoD is coming to the end of its negotiations in relation to that specific issue and, once they are completed, it is the intention, as I stated, of the Ministry of Defence to gift the site to OFMDFM, if it will take it.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, Ross, for that information.

As I said before the intervention, the St Lucia site is critical to the town. It complements the education campus, and it complements all the other work carried out in the town, including the

environmental improvement scheme and the riverside walk that will go through the site. Much of that work has been led by the district council, including the Strule Arts Centre.

As has been said, DSD rolled out a master plan, which was the result of comprehensive consultation with the local community, the council, the chamber of commerce, DEL, DSD, Planning Service and others. It developed a shared vision for the site. Unfortunately, because of the logjam that we have been in, the master plan has been put on hold. There were good ideas in the master plan. It looked at the cultural aspect, the possibility for niche retail catering and hospitality and, of course, of fundamental importance was the fact that it would be for public use. The negotiations have been ongoing for some time, and that seems to have caused the logjam.

The council has been working diligently on this over the past number of years. As I was a councillor until a number of weeks ago, I am across much of the detail. Phase 1 of the riverside walk, for example, is a live project that will continue into 2014. That will bring people into the heart of St Lucia and increase local interest. Therefore, it is very important to have clarity on the future of the site. The community is united. It sees the strategic importance of the site, and it sees it as hugely important for the future growth and development of the town. If it is not managed properly and, as the last Member said, it ends up in the hands of a private developer or a consortium or is land-banked, that would not be a good outcome for Omagh. That is not what we want to see.

I welcome the fact that the debate has come to the House. It took the debate to put focus on the site and its regeneration potential for our town, our district and the wider subregion. Although MLAs from different parties will disagree on many issues, I think that we will agree that we want to see the site in public ownership and secured and used to its maximum potential for the people of Omagh, the wider district and future generations.

Mr Byrne: I thank Mr Hussey for securing the debate. It is crucial that the issue is dealt with sooner rather than later. I will not repeat all that has been said about the historic significance of the site, but it has been crucial to the overall development of Omagh for over 100 years. In the future development of the site, it is crucial that it become a focal point for the rich heritage and for the historic nature of the buildings.

It is crucial that the MoD conclude its negotiations as soon as possible. Hopefully,

the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister will then willingly accept the site on behalf of the people at large. It is crucial that the site remain in public ownership to make the greatest utilisation of the site for the benefit of the people of Omagh and the surrounding district.

With regard to the work by DSD, RPS carried out a master plan and a range of consultations. It is a bit concerning that the master plan has never been published, and the sooner that happens the better, so that all stakeholders, particularly the district council, will have sight of it and some indication of what might or might not happen. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has a public duty to the people of Omagh to clarify its thinking on the proposals that might emerge for the site.

The gifting of the site is crucial, and we expect to be treated in the same way as other towns that have military sites that were gifted to the Executive. I fully support the arguments outlined by Mr Hussey and supported by Declan McAleer. My party representatives on Omagh District Council have supported the development in the past, and I hope that it can be realised for the future. Finally, it is crucial that the Executive show a commitment to Omagh with regard to the site, that a meaningful use can be made of the site for the wider benefit of the people and that the historical legacy will be protected into the future.

Adjourned at 4.00 pm.



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