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to arrive not later than two weeks after publication of this report.

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 June 2013

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Flanagan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Sula dtosaímid leis an ráiteas, caithfidh mé a rá go bhfuil brón orm nach raibh mé anseo inné chun an cheist a bhí agam a chur ar an Aire Forbartha Sóisialta. Before the Minister starts his statement, I wish to take this opportunity to apologise to the House and to the Minister for Social Development for not being here yesterday to pose a question for oral answer that was in my name.

Ministerial Statements

Planning Policy Statement 16: Tourism

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement to the effect that I am now issuing Planning Policy Statement 16 on tourism and bringing it into effect.

This document will supersede the current policies for tourism in 'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland'. With the spotlight of the world on us and with the particular attention on Fermanagh, this new policy is timely and relevant. It attempts to shape how we can manage and plan tourism developments and, as we do so, safeguard our great heritage. With other Executive Ministers, I was down in Enniskillen last night at a press function. Given the weather, the scenery and the scale of attention, it clearly is a great opportunity for Fermanagh and the North, and this tourist policy will fit neatly into maximising those opportunities as we go forward.

I wish to acknowledge all who contributed to the policy, particularly since the consultation on the draft. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and her officials, the chair, chief executive and staff of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and Department of the Environment (DOE) officials have been essential to today's outcome and the signpost that it offers towards sustainable tourist development. As I will outline in this statement and in the answers to the questions that I will be asked, it deals with tourist development in settlement areas and in rural areas. It protects from inappropriate development and safeguards tourism assets, but it creates opportunities at the same time.

The PPS takes account of the emerging tourism 'Priorities for Action' plan being brought forward by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and

Investment, which sets out a new vision, strategic direction and targets for tourism. The targets for achievement by 2020 are to increase visitor numbers to 4.5 million and to double earnings from tourism to £1 billion — that is, to increase earnings by 100% in the next six to seven years and to make tourism a £1 billion a year industry. All of that will revolve around the scale, wonder and beauty of our natural and built heritage. Six of the 10 top visitor attractions in Northern Ireland are from our built and natural heritage. The tourism opportunities around them will create jobs for many people. All those targets reflect the tourism industry's potential for further growth. They also underline the potential for tourism as a key economic driver. As the tourism sector grows in a sustainable way, so do jobs, services and facilities.

The aim of PPS 16 is, first, to ensure that the planning system can play its part in achieving those targets and to manage the provision of sustainable, high-quality tourism developments in appropriate locations in the built and natural environment. This is not a free-for-all for tourism development in settlement areas and rural locations. It is a pathway for the provision of sustainable, high-quality tourism developments. As one of the planning policies in the statement outlines, we will be rigorous with regard to character, design and quality.

Secondly, the PPS also continues the thrust of existing planning policy to safeguard these assets from insensitive development so as to protect their intrinsic quality and attractiveness to tourists. Given that six of the 10 top visitor attractions are in our built and natural heritage, we would be cutting off our nose to spite our face if we were to permit insensitive development that would impact on their intrinsic quality and their attractiveness to tourists, and there could be job losses.

Our cities, towns and villages have a lot to offer to tourists. As well as transport links, accommodation, restaurants and shops, our settlements boast places of historical or cultural interest. They provide entertainment and other attractions. I have only to look to my right to my colleague from the Foyle constituency to be reminded of an example of how our cities, towns and villages — our settlement areas — create opportunities, not least in this year of the City of Culture. Tourism benefits from the synergy created between new developments and existing businesses and facilities, and urban areas offer the greatest potential for generating optimum levels of tourism spend. It is at the heart of the policy that tourism development should preferably revolve around

settlements, whether they are defined as villages, hamlets, towns or cities, because, when such a synergy is created, tourism and tourism development opportunities can arise. That is why PPS 16 has a general presumption in favour of tourism development in settlements.

The policies in PPS 16 also recognise that tourists visit different areas for different reasons and to enjoy different experiences. That is the second big theme in the planning policy statement: how do we have sustainable, high-quality development in areas outside settlements in our rural locations. Not all forms of tourism development will be suited to an urban location. PPS 16, therefore, facilitates sustainable tourism development in the countryside, and the final document has moved on from the draft to provide particular flexibility and additional opportunities.

The focus of PPS 16 with respect to sustainable, high-quality development in the countryside will be to promote such development in appropriate locations and be sensitive to the rural context. It ensures that such development is sustainable in the broader planning policy context of the regional development strategy 2035 and PPS 21 on sustainable development in the countryside, and it seeks to not allow random, inappropriate or excessive development in the countryside.

PPS 16 makes provision in the countryside for tourist amenities by allowing development that requires a rural location — for example, an angling centre or a mountain bike trail. Similarly, it allows for tourist amenity proposals that need to be located close to an existing tourist attraction in the countryside, such as a visitor centre associated with a particular site of historical or archaeological importance.

As regards proposals for tourist accommodation in the countryside, PPS 16 removes the criticised tourism needs test that currently applies. It was widely criticised in the consultation on draft PPS 16. It was felt that the needs test did not answer the requirements of potential sustainable and high-quality rural development opportunities. Replacement of the needs test with specific criteria tailored to different forms of tourism development will improve the transparency of policy and make it easier for developers to make sure that their proposals accord with planning policy. I encourage people to read through the various clauses in the document.

PPS 16 and the various expressions of policy therein provide for new hotels, guest houses and tourist hostels in the countryside where the

proposal involves the redevelopment of an appropriate existing building. Executive Ministers raised some issues about self-catering accommodation because there was a concern that there would be not enough or too much self-catering accommodation development in rural areas. There are three types of opportunity whereby tourism development in the countryside will be considered appropriate. Such opportunities include self-catering in association with existing tourism accommodation such as a hotel or guest house or in association with a tourist amenity such as a golf course or where the self-catering proposal involves the restoration of an existing clachan. In all those cases, the policy requires the units to be retained for tourism use and not used for permanent residential accommodation, and that will obviously be conditioned in any planning permission that may be granted.

An element of flexibility from the draft PPS is the provision for a new or extended holiday or caravan park in the countryside subject to the proposal providing a high-quality and sustainable form of tourism development and being based on an overall design concept that demonstrates respect for the surrounding landscape, rural character and site context. Given that this is a move from the draft policy, it has been informed not only by DETI and the NITB but by the caravan organisations themselves.

Occasionally — I stress that it will be rare rather than necessarily occasionally — unique proposals for major tourism development proposals may be put forward. PPS 16 sets out an exceptional circumstances policy that allows for such a proposal, providing that it can demonstrate exceptional benefit on three levels: benefit to the regional tourism industry; sustainable benefit to the locality; and the requirement for a countryside location.

The tourism priorities for action plan states that it is important to value what the tourist values, and that is reflected in PPS 16. Unmanaged and unsustainable development is not in anyone's interest. If permitted, inappropriate development would prejudice the longer-term interests of the tourism industry.

Northern Ireland boasts great assets, such as the city walls, the Causeway and glens, the Mourne, the Fermanagh lakelands and numerous historical sites and blue flag beaches that are valued and visited by those of us fortunate enough to live here and by tourists from further afield. Those assets are vital in providing a high-quality and often unique visitor

experience and serve to underpin our tourism sector. PPS 16 continues the existing policy to safeguard tourism assets from inappropriate and harmful development in order to maintain their integrity and tourism value.

PPS 16 also includes general and design criteria applicable to all forms of tourism development to ensure the delivery of sustainable, safe and high-quality tourism schemes. Design is being increasingly embedded into the planning process and into development generally, whether on the tourism side or across other sectors of public spend. More and more design is being built into proposals. That is part of PPS 16, and the relevant Executive Ministers recently wrote to me signing off an urban design guide to ensure that, if we are to grant planning permissions, they should live up to better and higher design standards.

PPS 16 provides a planning policy framework that is right for Northern Ireland by striking a careful and sensitive balance between environmental concerns and requirements and the development of the tourism industry. It underpins the work that I am doing in other areas, such as the recently announced half a million pound regeneration fund for coastal communities and the £1 million dereliction fund that has been made available to tackle dereliction and spruce up a number of areas in Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

Importantly, PPS 16 will contribute to our economic prosperity by safeguarding our rich and diverse tourism assets and by ensuring that future tourism development is sustainable and of high quality. I take the opportunity, as I did at the beginning of the statement, to put on record my thanks to DETI and the NITB, as well as DOE officials, for their invaluable input and contribution to the development of PPS 16. This version is better and more comprehensive and creates more opportunities in a proper manner for tourism development. Executive colleagues welcomed PPS 16 at a meeting in June, and I now commend it to the House.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the new PPS 16. As the Minister said, it is very timely. In my experience, friends and family who visit Northern Ireland from crowded cities such as Hong Kong and other places always want to go out to the countryside. The Minister mentioned the much criticised tourism needs test that

applies, particularly in rural areas. The Minister said that the replacement of the needs test by specific criteria tailored to different forms of tourism development will improve the transparency of policy. Will the Minister expand a bit more on the specific criteria in the new PPS 16?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member, and I hope that more and more people come from crowded places to this slightly less crowded place. There are not that many crowds down in Fermanagh at the moment, certainly on the protest side.

In the planning policy statement, I refer Members to TSM 1 to TSM 7. They contain the three phases of the planning policy. TSM 1 is the presumption of sustainable and high-quality development in settlements. As I indicated, that covers everything from a village right through to a city. A settlement is defined as the line in the ground that defines a settlement limit, however you might describe that settlement limit. Within that limit, there is a presumption in favour of development.

The second phase of the document is TSM 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. They are the policies that deal with the specific issues of potential high-quality and sustainable development in rural locations. Previously, you had to prove a need in order to have a tourist amenity, such as self-catering in a potential hotel, guest house or tourist development, but now specific criteria are captured in TSM 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6. They cover the full range of potential high-quality and sustainable development in the rural location. I will give you one example. I refer Members to the document, where it is detailed what might happen for each and all potential tourist development in the rural landscape.

TSM 4 captures the exceptional benefit test. Although there may be proposals that do not qualify under any other planning guidelines, is there an exceptional benefit test whereby a proposal could happen, whereas otherwise it would fail the policy requirements? Those tests are threefold: it requires a countryside location; it is sustainable for the locality; and it brings exceptional benefit to regional tourism. In that way, the needs test is no longer in place. There is a criteria-based assessment and so on and so forth in respect of the other potential opportunities, be they self-catering, hotels, guest houses or tourism accommodation.

The third element of the planning policy statement is, first, in respect of design and, secondly, in respect of safeguarding tourism assets. The three streams converge in the

planning policy, which, in a balanced and proper manner and in a sustainable and high-quality ambition, is the right approach for tourism going forward.

Mr Anderson: I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, you referred to tourism development in the countryside. I will keep on the theme of rural tourism, to which the Committee Chair referred: to what extent do you see potential for those living on farms and wanting to diversify to put a tourism project in place and become more involved in tourism? How would that develop under the new PPS 16, especially in relation to the rural development programme?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. When it comes to a rural development and tourist developments in general, three opportunities are presented to people. The first is what is now captured in the planning policy statement. The second is what is already captured in PPS 21, which governs rural location. The third is what is already captured by development plans. So, when it comes to shaping tourism opportunities for people who wish to develop in a rural location or who live in a rural location, there are now three opportunities. With PPS 21, you could, for example, convert a farm building into a potential tourist amenity. Under development plans — this is particularly relevant given the Fermanagh plan — areas and opportunities are identified in the local development plan for tourist opportunities to be developed. I would like to think that in 700 days, on the far side of the devolution of the development plan functions to local councils, they will take that forward more and more in the development function. The third opportunity is what we have here, identifying the criteria that will govern all potential rural opportunities.

I stress that the presumption in favour is in respect of settlement developments. Thereafter, there will be potential for favourable outcomes if they qualify under the criteria for various tourist development. When you capture all of that and given the opportunities therein, there are clear opportunities for those who want to locate tourist accommodation in a rural location or those who live in a rural location and want to develop tourist accommodation.

No planning policy is captured in this proposal for bed and breakfasts because we believe that opportunities already exist for them. I suggest that that is a clear opportunity for those who live on and may farm the land in going forward.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement, but the key to all of this is having a proper rural tourism strategy. There are good opportunities out there, but I want to pick on two key elements with respect to development in open countryside.

First, there are opportunities within the angling fraternity as regards promoting chalets and guest houses. You mentioned that DETI was involved in the process. We do not have a proper rural tourism strategy yet; we have not cracked that nut. What in this policy will deliver for those who want to get into groups such as the angling fraternity —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind the Member that there must be a question somewhere.

Mr Boylan: Yes, I will just finish this — and provide chalets and guest houses?

Mr Attwood: As I indicated in my statement, DETI is developing an overarching tourism strategy. When it comes to tourism generally or a rural tourism strategy in particular, that Department is taking forward that work. When that work matures and is completed, it will be complementary to the planning policy statement that has been issued and approved by the Executive. It lays down the planning considerations around rural tourist development. In my view, that will be an essential piece of the jigsaw in the overall rural tourism strategy for Northern Ireland. Therefore, it falls to DETI to take forward the tourist strategy. However, as I indicated in my answer to Mr Anderson, subject to what that overarching regional strategy may be, local councils might now be beginning to think about what dedicated local tourism strategies might look like on the far side of the reform of local government, when development plan functions transfer to local councils and, indeed, as was agreed by the Executive a number of months ago, when additional tourism functions fall to local councils in 2017.

On the point about angling, I refer the Member to TSM 5 in the policy, which deals with self-catering. That might be an option for the angling fraternity, which represents a huge tourism opportunity for this part of the world. You have only to look at Fermanagh to see that in very sharp relief as we speak. What does TSM 5 say about self-catering? It says that there can be self-catering development where there is existing tourist accommodation — if there is a hotel, for example, there might be an

opportunity for self-catering development in and around it — or there can be self-catering associated with an amenity. Fishing is, if you like, an amenity, and I suggest that there will be clear opportunities for self-catering in association with an amenity, be that a golf course, a bike park or a river or lake that is used by the fishing community. Thirdly, there can be self-catering in respect of an existing clachan. What is a clachan? It is a group of family-associated accommodation that may go back centuries or generations. So, there are self-catering opportunities in rural locations in each of those ways, without a free-for-all or an opening of the dam. They are policies that apply to the rural area, as opposed to the settlement. Those three examples of self-catering development, if it is of high quality and good design and is done in a sustainable way, are part of the answer to the Member's question.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's statement as yet another example, if it were needed, of the way in which he is driving change in his Department. The Minister mentioned the development plan and tourism development functions that will transfer under RPA. We all know about the issues with the interpretation of planning policy statements. Are there any plans in the Department to do some joint training across councils and the Planning Service to embed this planning policy statement?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for remarks and her question. Certainly, my sense in the Department was that there was a training capacity issue, be it on the interpretation of PPS 21 or on the management of renewables applications for the likes of wind turbines. That is why dedicated training was introduced into the planning regime in respect of PPS 21 and individual wind turbine applications. That was to ensure that people understood what the policy meant; that there was consistency in the application of policy between divisional planning offices; that planning decisions, whatever the outcome, were made in good time and were based on good evidence; and that there was no uncertainty or doubt. You see the evidence of that with PPS 21 and renewables applications, particularly for wind turbines.

Given that this will be a more flexible, criteria-based policy, it is accepted that there will be a requirement for some level of training in order to ensure that there is consistency and avoidance of doubt, that there is certainty and that the policy lives up to the ambition that has been set by myself and the Executive.

So there will be training around this to ensure that it works well and achieves the policy's ambition as we move forward. Part of that will be the training regime that will be put in place in the run down to local government reform.

11.00 am

There is a group in my Department working with councils, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, the National Association of Councillors and the Local Government Staff Commission. It has scoped out all of the training needs, especially around the planning function, in the run down to local government reform. Clearly, given that it will be part of the transfer of planning function and that it is a new policy, it is one element in which people, be they planning officers, councillors or council management, will all require training.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Minister for his statement. I wonder whether the planning policy will actually be a help or hindrance to future development. The jury will be out for a period of time. My question follows on from Ms Lo's question on the criteria-based assessments as opposed to the needs test. Will those criteria include issues of natural tourist attractions, such as the Mourne, the Causeway Coast and, indeed, the Fermanagh lakeland? Would the Lough Erne golf resort, which we see in the spotlight now, actually get planning permission under that policy? There was not always a golf course or other attractions on that site.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. I believe that laying down criteria and then working that through operationally on decisions is a better standard against which to judge an application than the needs-based test. That can end up being more uncertain, arbitrary and subjective. It is better to have an objective criteria-based approach to making policy than the one that there was heretofore. The fact that in the consultation, which now goes back some time, there was such widespread criticism from across the range of stakeholders, especially those who have the leading responsibility for tourism development in the North, including NITB, and that they had drawn those conclusions is testament to the weakness of the needs-based approach and the strength of a criteria-based approach.

If you go through the TSMs that are now part of the policy, you see that, as I indicated, there are two elements that are very relevant to the Member's question. The first is TSM 8, which lays down the requirement to safeguard tourism

assets. Therefore, whilst there will be a criteria-based policy for sustainable, high-quality rural development, it has to be measured against TSM 8, which safeguards tourism assets. So, while there are going to be opportunities for rural, sustainable, high-quality development, if it fails the test of safeguarding tourism assets, there might not be development in one area or another.

On the other hand, there is also going to be an exceptional benefit test. So, while something may not fulfil the other standards that are outlined in the planning policy, if there is an exceptional benefit to regional tourism, it is sustainable locally and it requires a countryside location, it might be granted. In that tension, we can work through what the right answer is. We safeguard tourism assets, but there will be rare occasions where exceptional benefit might see some developments. I am not saying whether or not those new standards would apply to the Lough Erne golf resort, save to say that, in terms of the use of that piece of land for tourism opportunity, a hotel of a matching standard would, of course, have a high standard. My judgement is that, under previous policy or under this future policy, it gets over the line.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire.

I welcome the amendments to draft PPS 16, which was universally accepted as a disaster because it would have devastated the rural tourism economy. As Tom Elliott said, the Lough Erne golf resort would not have been developed under that policy. I have not yet seen the policy as a whole, but the previous policy stated that the strategy encourages development to be sited where there is a choice of transport, with the location not dependent predominantly on access by car. How has that changed under the new policy, given that very many of Fermanagh's most visited tourist attractions, such as the Marble Arch caves, do not have public transport?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to identify — I do not know whether I would share the use of the word "disaster" — that a lot of good work has been done since the consultation between, as I indicated, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and NITB. Some of those conversations were between me and senior staff, including the chief executive of NITB. This has been fashioned in a way that certainly creates more opportunity while not endangering Fermanagh's heritage, including the caves.

I recommend that the Member looks at the policy as a whole, because it captures in TSM 1 the presumption of developing in a settlement. Why would you have presumption of development in a settlement? That was indicated in part of the Member's question. There you have synergy, with restaurants, parks, hotels and other accommodation, transport infrastructure, and provision for car parking and public transport. Where all that is gathered in a settlement area, whatever its scale and dimension, and whatever you might call it, there should be a presumption of development, because therein is a synergy, with those tourism assets being developed.

The point of the reconfigured policy, as opposed to the draft policy, is to recognise that there are major assets such as the caves. Last night, I saw some sights that I had not seen before in Fermanagh, such as Castle Coole, which goes back 230 years. That house is viewed as the best of that vintage on the island of Ireland. Anybody who goes to look at it would draw that conclusion. Mr Flanagan has, no doubt, been there before, but I had not. I recommend that everyone should go and have a look at it. It is a wonderful building in a wonderful location, and it was a wonderful night. Congratulations to Invest Northern Ireland and the Tourist Board for putting that event together. Even in the two or three hours that I was there, the point of the exercise was well proven, because some of the most high-profile media figures that you see on your screens from day to day were sitting in the marquee, eating the food and having conversations about how wonderful this part of the world is. So whatever the toing and froing might be at the G8, and whatever our parties' views about what should or should not be the outcome, it was a wonderful event.

The purpose of all the other supporting TSMs, beyond that which sees development in settlement areas, is to say that if there is an opportunity around Marble Hill; sorry, around Marble caves in Fermanagh — I mixed up Marble Hill strand and Marble Arch caves. If that is high quality, is sustainable and is self-catering around an existing amenity, it may fulfil the policy test, which may drive tourism development and, therefore, drive tourism jobs and tourism spend, and that would, ultimately, benefit everybody.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the Minister's statement today. Tourism is a fast-growing industry, particularly given the potential for job creation right across our region, with farmers and those already in the tourism business getting a good wake-up call, and I think that the

statement falls well into that. Has the Minister any plans to bring to a conclusion any outstanding planning applications currently in the system that fall into this planning policy, particularly given that, in the south Down area, we are in the process of building the likes of bridges, which will be new tourist attractions?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for her question. As she will be aware, planning permission for Narrow Water bridge was issued quite a number of months ago, and there now seems to be a much more positive atmosphere around all that. It is my understanding that, in the past number of days or the next number of days, an application in respect of the proposed ferry link between Greencastle and Carlingford has been or will be received; that has not come in to the system, or it has just come in. Clearly, there will be issues around that that will have to be interrogated.

A number of other individual applications regarding potential tourist opportunities in and around the Mourne are being dealt with at local offices. These are very challenging applications given their location, but it may be that, around this policy, there will be a pathway to work through those and come out with a decision, whatever that decision might be.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, PPS 16 is out today and the same old restrictions are still there. I did not see any reference to them in your statement. I am talking about areas of special scientific interest, areas of outstanding natural beauty, conservation zones, and so on, which have been very restrictive to planning applications over the years in rural areas, especially in my area of the glens. Am I right in thinking that, for example, under exceptional circumstances, this new PPS 16 has the wherewithal to override these present restrictions? Otherwise, we will come back to the same old arguments that we have had for years to try to get planning permission, especially for the farming community and the non-farming rural dweller.

Mr Attwood: I think that the Member is reading the mood of the House wrong and he is reading the content of the document wrong. The reason why the policy has been brought forward is to reconfigure the approach to sustainable, high-quality development in the rural location; the presumption in favour of developing in settlement areas; and criteria-based assessment regarding a range of categories of tourist opportunities in rural areas.

Now, if it ends up that we have the same outcome as we did under the previous needs-based test, the Member might be justified in drawing that conclusion. However, to draw that conclusion about "the same old restrictions", to borrow his language, about this policy, which has been shaped in that environment and reworked since the consultation in order to acknowledge that there might be a need for more opportunities that are appropriate, sustainable and high quality in the rural location, I do not think is right. I do not think that you can draw the conclusion, based on a document that has just been issued, that it is going to have the same old restrictions when the policy content is about trying to rework old restrictions and having the right constraints and the right opportunities going forward.

Part of the assessment is clearly going to be the wonder and scale of our natural heritage, expressed through the designations that the Member referred to, but I hope that the Member is not suggesting that a consequence of this policy will be that every area of outstanding natural beauty will fall foul of a proposal and that there is going to be an exceptional benefit to build whatever tourist amenity might be in the middle of such a designation. That is not going to be a consequence of this policy. Exceptional benefit, which is what the Member referred to, will be restricted to regional tourism benefit that is sustainable locally and that requires a countryside location. That will be a very measured and discerning policy rather than one that sees the building of tourist amenities in every designated area in the North. That is not the intention of the policy.

I believe the policy will deal with appropriate, sustainable, high-quality development in the rural location, the presumption of development in settlement areas and criteria-based development in other areas. I think that will create more than enough opportunities if it is interpreted and applied properly to ensure that the worst fears articulated by the Member, who may not have fully read the document, will not be realised.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his statement. We very much welcome the publication of PPS 16. It has been a long time coming; I think it got lost somewhere between PPS 14 and PPS 21. Will the Minister tell us whether the new policy will ensure that more weight is given to an application's additionality to tourism development in an area as well as more flexibility? Will more flexibility be afforded around areas such as roads? I am thinking particularly of the only caravan park in Derry, which is on the outskirts of the city, and which

has been unable to get planning permission, despite being of a very high standard, and now more than ever is in very high demand.

11.15 am

Mr Attwood: I understand why the Member says that the policy was lost. However, it has now been found and published. Hopefully, that is the standard going forward. Yes, arising from the consultation, and because of the conversation with stakeholders, there will be elements of further flexibility. That is captured in the various elements of the planning policy.

Remember that the planning authority, be it the Environment Minister when it comes to article 31s or the senior planning management team in a divisional planning office when it comes to local applications, is the executive authority; ultimately, it has to make the judgement call. Whatever the advice of a consultee might be, be it Roads Service or another, including internal consultees in the Environment Agency, as long as the executive authority is making a decision based on good evidence and proper process, it can make a decision contrary to that advice. I have made it very clear to the planning management that it is the executive authority. Roads Service or the Environment Agency is not the executive authority; they are there to give best advice. The planning authority does not have to be railroaded into taking best advice. On the far side of that, it can make a decision contrary to the advice that it is given, where there are good grounds, process and evidence so to do.

I am very aware of the particular case that the Member is referring to. It remains under consideration, including by me.

Mr Milne: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. What does the Minister deem a unique proposal under the exceptional circumstances policy? I am thinking of an application in my county of Derry. I do not know whether the Minister is aware of a planning application to build a life-size Noah's ark as part of a tourism project. Maybe the Minister would deem that to be a unique proposal.

Mr Attwood: I was not aware of that particular proposal, but I would like to hear about it. I am surprised that there has not been some publicity about it, but I am sure that, after today, there will be, for good or ill.

As I indicated, there are three criteria in the exceptional benefit test. It has to have

exceptional benefit to regional tourism, so it is not a locality-based proposal. To go back to Mrs McKeivitt's question, a tourist lodge development in the foothills of the Mourne might be viewed as having local benefit. However, it might not be viewed as having regional benefit, depending on how you interpret it. It has to have exceptional benefit to regional tourism; it has to be in a sustainable locality; and it requires a countryside location. On the far side of that, an assessment can be made of the merits of any application, including the particular one that you refer to. However, it will be a rare case. This is not going to be a mechanism that will approve many things that might otherwise have been refused. Due to the exceptional benefit and the high threshold that is suggested by that, it will be a smaller number of rare cases rather than many. I wait to see whether, under current planning policy, PPS 21, this planning policy statement or the exceptional benefit test, that particular proposal crosses over the line.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. He said that the policy provides for new hotels, guest houses and tourist hostels in the countryside where the proposal involves the redevelopment of an appropriate existing building. Will the Minister clarify whether that is the only case for development, and, therefore, that he will oppose any greenfield sites?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. If you go through TSM 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, you will see that there are quite a number of opportunities for rural development, be it hotels, self-catering, guest houses or tourist hostels. As I said, PPS 16 does not refer to bed-and-breakfast opportunities because we think that there is sufficient policy cover in other areas of planning law and policy to capture those.

As for hotels, guest houses and tourist hostels specifically, I refer the Member to TSM 3 of the new planning policy statement, which suggests that such proposals should replace existing accommodation or be newbuilds on the periphery of settlements. TSM 3 states that for hotels, guest houses and tourist hostels generally. For the exceptional benefit test, something may be of such scale and importance that it moves beyond TSM 3 and is covered by TSM 4.

Steps 2 Success

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I wish to make a statement about the procurement and introduction of the new Steps 2 Success programme that has been developed by my Department. Steps 2 Success will replace the main adult return-to-work programme known as Steps to Work. This is scheduled to take place in June 2014.

The current programme, Steps to Work, has been in operation since 2008 and has served Northern Ireland well. That is demonstrated by its performance results, which have been independently assessed and verified. Although it is a strong programme, it is clear that the new challenges posed by a range of factors, including benefit changes as a result of welfare reform and the need to secure improved performance, mean that a next-generation programme is essential.

I am confident that, in developing a replacement programme, we are building on the strengths of Steps to Work. The contracts for delivering Steps to Work will end in 2014, and, with the ongoing economic uncertainty, it is important that we have a new employment programme in place that addresses the needs of those struggling to gain, or indeed regain, a foot on the employment ladder.

Steps 2 Success has been designed to improve the performance of my Department's employment programmes for unemployed and economically inactive benefit customers. The significant rise in unemployment, high levels of economic inactivity and the introduction of universal credit have established the need for a step change in the delivery of employment services.

Although our current and forthcoming employment programmes are open to a range of clients, the persistent challenge of long-term unemployment in this society should, in particular, compel us to have the most effective and efficient set of interventions possible. In particular, there is a need to focus even more on positive outcomes and sustained employment for programme participants to ensure value for money and to make sure that no one is left behind.

The key aim of Steps 2 Success is to help eligible benefit recipients to find and sustain work, thereby supporting the needs of employers and the economy. Our policy objectives will be to increase the number of participants finding and sustaining employment; support those most in need, regardless of

employment barriers; maximise the flexibility in the programme approach; and build a programme that can adapt to changes in the economy and the needs of clients.

Although we would have developed a successor programme to Steps to Work in any event, in developing the Steps 2 Success programme, my officials have endeavoured to ensure that it is future-proofed and designed to meet the requirements of the impending universal credit conditionality groups. Universal credit — the single working-age credit that will replace a number of social security benefits — should come into effect across Northern Ireland from April 2014. Nevertheless, Steps 2 Success will stand on its own feet, independent of decisions that are made on welfare reform.

Steps 2 Success is also part of a wider assistance package being developed across the Department's employment service. Alongside the new programme, we have developed a more work-focused tailored service for all our customers. This service improvement is being rolled out across the jobs and benefits office/jobcentre network to enhance and strengthen the help available to all customers who are seeking work. Jobseekers will continue to receive initial help and support from an employment service adviser. These advisers will deliver an enhanced front line service using diagnostic tools and support to help customers to find and sustain work at the earliest opportunity.

There is a wide portfolio of provision that front line staff can avail themselves of to support clients at the earliest stage in getting back to work.

To inform the development of Steps 2 Success, I asked my Department to commission a study, which was carried out by the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion. Its remit was to consider the feasibility of an outcome-based employment programme. Inclusion entered into discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, such as employer representatives, our current delivery partners and representatives of the voluntary and community sector, to inform the development of a potential delivery model for a new employment programme for Northern Ireland. Inclusion also looked at models for employment programmes in other places.

The feasibility study that was produced was then used as the basis for the initial high-level design for Steps 2 Success, which was issued for public consultation in July 2012. Alongside the consultation exercise, officials arranged information sessions for all interested parties.

A total of 175 people representing 83 organisations attended the sessions, and participants raised key issues around the proposed programme design, objectives and eligibility. In particular, there was significant interest in proposals for the contract area and duration of the programme, supply chain management and funding.

The consultation exercise has been invaluable to the Department. We received over 80 written responses to the consultation document with a range of useful suggestions on how we might improve the programme design and delivery. Significant time and effort went into making sure that the development of Steps 2 Success took account of the views and opinions of key stakeholders, many of whom have experience of delivering support to unemployed people, including those with health or disability issues that impact on their employability.

There has also been productive engagement with the Committee for Employment and Learning over the past year. The Committee was briefed on a number of occasions on our emerging thinking and has provided some invaluable feedback. That engagement provided the Department with a lot of information to consider, and, as may be expected, there was a variation in the number of members agreeing and disagreeing with the proposals. Crucially, however, there was broad support for the majority of the design features outlined in the consultation document: the objectives of the programme; the flexibility of the approach; the non-specified hours of attendance; the proposed programme length; assessment of the supply chain as part of procurement; the need for providers to demonstrate support for smaller organisations; the code of conduct for lead contractors; and higher payments for higher performance. There was less support for the following initial proposals: automatic entry for recipients of employment and support allowance and incapacity benefit; treating Northern Ireland as a single contract area; capping the contract duration to three years; the random allocation of customers to providers; and the 40:60 split between attachment fees and outcome-related funding.

The comments and opinions were carefully considered and assessed, and a number have influenced the amended design features of the programme. Adjustments were made to a number of design features: the entry points for employment and support allowance; three contract areas instead of one; the contract length; the removal of the random allocation of

customers to a lead contractor; and the amount to be paid for attachment and outcome funding.

I am confident that these positive changes to the final design of Steps 2 Success indicate my Department's commitment to listen and respond to the views of others. I am equally confident that we are building a programme that will be responsive to the needs of unemployed people in Northern Ireland. This programme will also provide a challenging but exciting prospect for our delivery partners.

The design of Steps 2 Success is now complete. The programme will primarily be available to people receiving jobseeker's allowance (JSA) and those in the employment and support allowance work-related activity group. JSA claimants aged between 18 and 24 will be mandated to Steps 2 Success if they have failed to find work after nine months on benefit. Those aged 25 and over will be mandated after 12 months on benefit. Over-25s who have concerns about their ability or opportunities to secure employment without more expert help can request referral to Steps 2 Success when they have been in receipt of jobseeker's allowance for six months or more. When customers face significant barriers that cannot be easily addressed by the employment service, they may be referred to Steps 2 Success early. This early entry may include customers with more specialised needs, such as drug or alcohol dependency, people with a disability, ex-prisoners or those who are homeless.

11.30 am

Steps 2 Success will be accessible to people who are still receiving incapacity benefit. Those receiving income support as a lone parent or carer will be able to volunteer to join Steps 2 Success if they wish to get more help to find work. Customers in the ESA support group who are deemed to be unable to work can join Steps 2 Success voluntarily at any time if they wish to seek help to find work. Anyone not receiving one of those benefits can continue to receive help and advice from the employment service but will not enter Steps 2 Success. Once referred to Steps 2 Success, participants will remain with the contracted provider for up to 12 months, while those with significant barriers or health-related problems may remain for up to 18 months to receive more intensive help to prepare for and find work.

Flexibility is at the heart of the Steps 2 Success programme design, with the objective of ensuring that contracted providers do whatever works best for each individual to ensure

sustained employment. In essence, contracted providers will work with participants to jointly identify their employability needs and determine the best way to meet those needs. That flexibility will be underpinned by a service guarantee tailored to each of the customer groups. The service guarantee will ensure that all participants receive high-quality, personalised support. Each participant will receive a copy of the service guarantee and will know what level of service they can at least expect to receive while participating in the programme. The number of hours of attendance and work-focused activity required of participants while on Steps 2 Success will be determined by the provider in agreement with each customer and depending on their needs. The service guarantee for each conditionality group will include a minimum level of participation to ensure that no one is left without regular contact from the provider or a subcontracted delivery organisation.

Contract management will play an important role in ensuring that an effective service is provided to Steps 2 Success participants. My Department will ensure that contracted providers deliver a service suited to the needs of their participants.

Steps 2 Success will be delivered in three contract areas, with one contracted provider responsible for each area. The model provides the opportunity to develop local initiatives and to engage a local supply chain in the delivery of the programme. In each contract area, the contracted provider will be required to deliver provision and provide access for all participants across the full geographical area and to develop a supply chain that can meet the needs of all participants. The initial contract period will run for four years of referrals, with an option to extend for a further two-year period, subject to satisfactory performance and achievement of targets.

Funding to contracted providers for the delivery of Steps 2 Success will consist of three main elements: an attachment fee, payable when a customer is accepted on to the programme by the provider; job entry, payable when a Steps 2 Success participant finds full-time employment, which is defined as 16 hours or more; and sustained employment, payable at intervals from three to 12 months after a client has sustained employment. In recognition of the Department's responsibility to help people acquire the skills and experience to find work, we will also pay providers an additional payment if a participant finds work while gaining a relevant accredited qualification through Steps 2 Success. Higher funding levels will be

payable for harder-to-help clients with more significant barriers to work, such as those who are early entrants and require more specialist support.

Funding for Steps 2 Success will be based on a 50:50 split between attachment fees and outcome-related payments at baseline performance level. That level is set by my Department on the basis of previous programmes, such as Steps to Work and Pathways to Work. The outcome-related funding element will be paid in stages, commencing with job entry and at subsequent intervals of sustainment for up to 12 months. Higher funding levels will also be available where a contracted provider exceeds performance targets and helps significantly more participants to find and sustain employment. Steps 2 Success participants who remain unemployed after completing their time on the programme will receive ongoing help and support from an employment service adviser for up to 26 weeks. If they still fail to find work, they will then be referred back to Steps 2 Success for a further 12 months.

The Steps 2 Success procurement will involve a two-stage tendering process. The first stage will commence in early July and will consist of a prequalification questionnaire, which will be an examination of the suitability and capability of potential suppliers to perform the contract. That process will ask questions regarding statutory requirements, technical or professional experience and financial standing. Successful organisations at stage 1 will then be shortlisted to progress to stage 2. That will be the full invitation to tender and will commence in October 2013.

Information sessions to provide an overview of the final design of Steps 2 Success and the detail required for those who wish to tender for the contracts have been arranged. The sessions will take place on 20 and 24 June 2013, and a high level of interest in attending them has already been indicated.

I cannot emphasise it strongly enough that the development of this bespoke programme for Northern Ireland is a prime example of the advantage of having a devolved Administration. We have been able to design the programme to meet the specific needs of people who require help to find work, while considering the viability and capability of local partners who may well play a key role in the delivery of Steps 2 Success. Although the Work Programme in Great Britain has been in the spotlight for a number of reasons, we have been able to monitor and learn from its performance. That

insight has helped us to avoid some of the pitfalls that have become more apparent.

It is important that Members understand that Steps 2 Success is a very different proposition to the GB Work Programme. Not only have we learned from their mistakes, we have also set our own path. Key differences include the undertaking of a detailed and comprehensive consultation process to build on the model from the feasibility study and to design a model that is appropriate for Northern Ireland; the introduction of a service guarantee setting minimum standards; payment for job entry; keeping the attachment fee for the full duration of the programme, which means not moving to a purely outcome-related funding model; a simpler model, with fewer categories of clients and simpler administrative processes; and additional funding for providers when a participant finds work and achieves a recognised qualification via Steps 2 Success.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to update the House. I look forward to updating Members further on the outcome of the Steps 2 Success procurement exercise and the ongoing achievements of the programme following its introduction next year.

Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I thank the Minister for his statement. He has outlined the policy objectives for the programme and indicated that its intent is to increase the number of participants finding and sustaining employment. Has he baselined the policy objectives, and does he have any defined targets to measure against? Also, what are the real long-term prospects for those on the programme? Will they simply be given short-term contracts and then, after a few months, find themselves right back where they started?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair for his questions. I will also put on record again the excellent engagement that we have had with the Committee on the issue. We look forward to continuing that as the process unfolds. The Member has asked two particular questions. The first one concerns what sort of targets we have. It is important that we have targets and that we recognise that the programme is about improved performance. At present, we work on the baseline performance of Steps to Work of around 29%. We would like to see revised targets for the new programme of 32% of people moving into sustained employment. If contractors are able to exceed that 32% target, they will become eligible for higher-level payments, so that is an incentive to move beyond that.

A lot of people wonder why the percentages are in the 20s and 30s: that is the norm for such programmes. I want to see our programme in Northern Ireland not only exceeding our performance hitherto but exceeding what is happening in Great Britain. I would like to think that, given that we have learned lessons from what they have tried to undertake there, we will be better placed to do that.

The second point that the Chair makes is about what happens in the longer term. Outcomes are based on sustained employment. We measure that in terms of someone being in work for at least 13 weeks after they leave the Steps 2 Success programme. Again, there is monitoring beyond that as well. It is important that we recognise that there is always a churn in the job market in any event, but this programme is not designed to simply shift people around and massage figures. It is really based on getting people into work and enabling them to keep the work that they gain through the help that we will, hopefully, provide through the programme.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his lengthy and detailed statement, which I welcome. As he said, much of it has been discussed with the Committee. There is some concern over the four-year duration. There was a possibility that there might be six-monthly or, perhaps, quarterly reviews of the contracts. Has that been decided, and have the account managers been appointed?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions. I stress that this is a major investment in public support and for the organisations that win the primary contracts. The rationale for the contract duration is to make this an attractive proposition to ensure that we get bids. There will be a necessary investment from organisations to begin with, and it will take time for companies to move through a break-even point before it becomes a successful proposition for them.

Some may be concerned that organisations could well make a profit or surplus on the back of the programme, but there is a very strong rationale for engagement with the private sector. There will be aspects of what we are trying to achieve as a Government that will, at times, be better delivered by the private sector, the community and voluntary sector or by elements of the social economy. It is important that we try to ensure that we drive as much efficiency and effectiveness into the scheme as we can, because it is fundamentally about achieving jobs outcomes for the people of Northern Ireland. The deliberations around the

contract duration have been framed by those considerations.

Ms McGahan: I thank the Minister for his statement and for the intervention that is being made under Steps 2 Success. What evaluation process will he put in place to ensure that employers do not exploit the scheme for cheap labour and it is not used to massage the unemployment figures?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. The scheme will be carefully monitored and scrutinised, and I draw the Member's attention in particular to the guarantees that we intend to put in place.

It is worth referring to what happens in Great Britain, where they talk about what is, in essence, a black box. People referred to the work programme there are, essentially, out of sight and out of mind. There is no real relationship with the jobcentres in Britain, and the providers are left to do with the participants what they will. The ethos there is strongly about simply getting results at any cost. We are taking a different approach here. It could be called a "grey box" approach: we want to give flexibility, but equally there are important accountability issues that I have been very mindful about from day one. First, we have to ensure that the providers are not picking off the easier cases and ignoring those who face larger barriers to engagement in the workplace. If anything, we are trying to incentivise the schemes to deal with those who face real barriers. Equally, we want to ensure that we provide genuine opportunities for people and that it is not simply a means by which people are exploited.

On the Member's wider point, I am very clear that I am not interested in simply shifting people around categories and trying to massage figures. The figures are what they are. The ultimate judgement by which we will have to assess the success of what we are doing in the labour market is the economic participation figure. I have already talked about what we are doing around economic inactivity, but I am not interested in taking people off inactivity into unemployment or vice versa. We have to get people into real jobs.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his statement, and I wish his Department well with Steps 2 Success. Will he acknowledge the contribution of the strategy board and the skills directorate of the One Plan in the north-west? Furthermore, will there be a special measure in the north-west area that fits into the priorities of

the One Plan for a subregional bespoke skills and training programme?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question, which, although linked to the subject, is slightly tangential. Regardless, I congratulate him on his plug for the north-west.

I can give the Member some good news in that we have agreed to allocate a member of our skills division to work directly with stakeholders in the north-west. A senior official from my Department will work with the skills directorate of the One Plan to better draw together and focus on skills issues in the north-west. There will be a very clear linkage between what is happening on the wider skilling issues and what is happening with employability issues and creating opportunities for people. So, hopefully, through that intervention, we will be able to provide a more effective service in the north-west. I appreciate that there are acute issues there that need to be addressed.

11.45 am

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the statement from the Minister this morning. Having visited the city last week with the Employment and Learning Committee and seen some excellent work happening there, I welcome his confirmation that a DEL skills official will be attached to the One Plan in Derry. I also look forward to welcoming the Minister to East Belfast tomorrow. How important has the public consultation and engagement with wider stakeholders been in arriving at this particular model?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions. We try to get around as best we can.

At times, there is a lot of cynicism around public consultations, with people thinking that they are just a paper exercise that Departments go through and that they have their mind made up in advance. People think that taking on board the views of stakeholders is a chore for us and that, in practice, we simply ignore them and just do what we originally intended. Generally speaking, that is not the case in government, but this is a very good and specific example where that absolutely was not the case. The consultation and the wider engagement with stakeholders has had a significant impact on the shaping and design of this. I am very conscious that we must be careful not to design things in a bubble and that we test our initial thoughts to make sure that they are achievable and workable in the particular circumstances that we have in Northern Ireland. I like to think

that the wider community will see the impact on the representations that have been made, particularly those of the key stakeholders who have taken the time to engage with us.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I thank the Minister for his statement. He will hardly be astonished to know that I remain to be convinced about the overall benefits of the scheme. In yet another lengthy statement, some key information has been omitted, particularly around the financial aspects of the scheme.

Will the Minister outline the payments that will be made to the agencies to help clients find employment? Will he outline why he has chosen to make lucrative payments to middlemen or middlewomen and not to those involved in either creating the job or finding the job? That money will be taken out of the local economy and sucked into administration through further unnecessary outsourcing and privatisation.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions. He has been consistent in his approach to this over the past number of months, at the very least.

I stress that, ultimately, this is about increased help for people, particularly those who have been out of work for a longer time, to find sustained employment. That is good for them as individuals, and it is good for the economy in Northern Ireland. If we have that as our starting base — I hope that there is consensus around that in the House — we then have to ask ourselves what the most effective means are of achieving that. I do not approach this with any major ideological position, and I ask the Member to do the same. We should be pragmatic about this.

We have to work on the basis of solid evidence on the nature of interventions that will be of assistance in finding people work. At times, that means bringing in the private sector. Such businesses and organisations can be more effective than the public sector in delivering particular outcomes. Sometimes, yes, they may well make a profit on the back of that, but that is part and parcel of the incentives involved in bringing in their expertise and technique.

In response to your colleague, I made it clear that we were not giving the private sector a blank cheque and that there would be a minimum service level agreement with them all as guarantees for those who are on the

schemes. We want to ensure that everyone is addressed and worked with.

This is not, ultimately, a cost-cutting exercise. I know that the Member has that concern, which he alluded to in the question. This is not about our finding a means of trimming the amount of money that we spend on helping people back into work. We are working on the assumption of a similar spend to that on Steps to Work. We are seeking to use the money that we spend on Steps to Work in a different way and, through a different programme design, to get a better outcome and increase the number of people who move into sustained employment.

If anything, this could end up costing us more. If that is the case, I would welcome that, because it would be a feature of the fact that we would be paying out additional payments to those organisations because they have exceeded their targets for moving people into employment. If we are in that territory, we will be doing very well. The benefits to the wider economy — people being in work, paying taxes into the system and spending their resources elsewhere in the economy — will be there for us all to see and benefit from.

Mr Douglas: I welcome the Minister's statement. Many of the participants in these programmes will have little or no qualifications. Once they gain recognised qualifications, what guidance will they be given about a route to further education?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He, like others, well recognises the context in which we are operating in Northern Ireland. At one end of the spectrum, we are doing very well in turning people out from higher education. We have a higher participation rate than virtually every other region in the UK. At the same time, we have a bigger profile of people with low or no qualifications. They are often the people who need the most help to move into the job market. Opportunities for people with low or no qualifications will diminish as the nature of work changes, so there is a real requirement to drive up qualifications on a whole range of levels.

One of the very particular design features of this system is flexibility, and that is to encourage the new providers and their subcontractors to work with people on an individualised basis around their particular needs. There is also an inbuilt incentive for people to gain qualifications, which is different from the work programme in Great Britain and is, therefore, another advantage of devolution.

We are responding to Northern Ireland's very particular skills landscape and trying to give people individual, tailored help.

Mr McAleer: Will the Minister explain why he plans to implement this scheme as opposed to extending the Step Ahead 50+ scheme, which would pay a decent wage for a decent job or a proper wage for a proper job?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Step Ahead 50+ is a very limited and narrow intervention for, as the title suggests, those who are over 50. It is anticipated that that will run until to March 2015, the duration of the current Budget period. In the wider context, this scheme is a replacement for Steps to Work as the main all-age return-to-work programme. We have to replace Steps to Work because it is coming to the end of its natural lifespan.

I made the point that we would be exploring this irrespective of whether welfare reform was happening or not. There are particular issues in relation to Steps to Work that we need to review and improve. While it has been an effective scheme in some respects, it is overly cumbersome in that 10 contract areas is too many and there is not sufficient flexibility for the current providers to address the very particular client needs that they come across. Hopefully, through a revised programme, we will deliver a more effective service for clients of all ages across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. Northern Ireland's unemployment figures are very worrying, with our claimant count the second highest of all 12 UK regions. I wish the Minister well in his endeavours to bring those figures down. The Minister advises that those who have been on benefits for nine months and 12 months will be mandated to take part in the programme. What will happen if an individual does not wish to take part in the programme? Will there be sanctions, and, if so, what are they?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for reminding the House of the context in which we are operating. We have a considerable challenge with respect to unemployment. The House will be aware that things have begun to change and that there are some very tentative signs that the unemployment situation is changing, but it is very early days, and we cannot afford to be complacent. If anything, we need to redouble our efforts, particularly if the economy is in an upswing, because, in that context, we can reap the rewards of a programme such as this.

She also mentioned people being mandated and asked what happens if they do not agree to that. At present, under Steps to Work, people are also mandated. It is important that people understand that this is not a new concept but one that has been accepted in Northern Ireland for the bulk of the past decade, if not longer. There is nothing new in it.

If someone does not go on the programmes, it is then to be considered what sanctions are deployed. It is worth reassuring Members that sanctions are deployed in a very small minority of cases. The number of cases of people not going on the programmes when they are suggested is very few and far between. Indeed, in the past, people have volunteered to go on the programmes rather than having to be mandated, because they understand the value of work and do not want to be on benefits. That situation will be even more acute when universal credit comes through. After that, there is still discretion on whether sanctions are deployed, and the individual circumstances will sometimes be taken into consideration. At present, sanctions through Steps to Work will be used in the smallest minority of cases — we are talking about a range of 1% to 2% of claimants. That should put it into perspective and give Members a guide.

Mr B McCrea: Unaccustomed as I am to speaking twelfth in this Assembly, can I ask the Minister whether it is true that approximately 70% of the people on the programme will not find work after it and that those who do will find low-paid unskilled work? What role does the programme play in the Minister's attempt to try to reduce long-term economic inactivity?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions. It is worthwhile explaining the nature of the statistics. At present, 29% of people move from Steps to Work into sustained employment, which is 13 weeks of employment, and we hope to increase that to a revised baseline of 32%. On the surface, that suggests that 70% of people therefore are not successful through the programme and do not move into work. However, some of those people will, in turn, in part through their experience on Steps to Work or Steps 2 Success in the future, find their way into work in due course. Others will have the opportunity to go back to, in the first case, the employment service advisers and, subsequently, into the employment programme after six months to receive further assistance. It is important that we recognise that there is a constant churn in our economy with people moving through those different programmes. There is not an automatic read-across that says

that, by definition, 70% of people are therefore not availing themselves of opportunities.

He is right to highlight that this is part of a wider suite of programmes. It is focused on people who are unemployed and is also there to pick up on people who are coming through the various inactivity categories. The House will be aware that we are developing an economic inactivity strategy in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and other Departments. The baseline analysis was published in April this year, and discussions are moving well with the different Departments. We hope to issue a strategy for public consultation in autumn this year.

Mr Newton: I welcome the Minister's statement — all seven pages of it. It requires some scrutiny. I also welcome the fact that he has built in incentives; that is a good thing. The statement says:

"Higher funding levels will also be available where a contracted provider exceeds performance targets and helps significantly more participants to find ... employment."

The target is 32%, and that leaves 68%. That seems a low target for such an ambitious scheme. Can I ask him to define what the term "significantly" means in the context of this incentive?

12.00 noon

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his questions and for his general welcome for the scheme. People may find that the targets are low, but I reiterate that they are very much in line with the targets of work programmes elsewhere, if not, indeed, higher and more challenging. It is useful to refer to the early stages of the work programme in Great Britain, where the current achievement rates for sustainable employment are much lower than those that we are talking about for Northern Ireland. So, we are seeking to do better than elsewhere.

There will be people who do not avail themselves directly of the opportunity of Steps 2 Success. Some of those people may find work of their own accord indirectly after they exit Steps to Work or Steps 2 Success, or they can go back into the scheme.

The Member referred to enhanced payments. We are essentially talking about people moving beyond the 32% target. In such cases, those people would be eligible for a considerably

higher payment level. That target refers essentially to the current 29% starting point, so it is not a massive increase. However, the amount of effort that it takes to increase these figures by 1% or 2% is considerable. This is a situation where there is a lot of stickability in the statistics, and that has been found in other jurisdictions. I would like to think that the way that we have designed the programme will put the new providers in the best place possible to try to exceed those targets.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. Although I welcome the intervention under Steps 2 Success, I have some concerns about the incentive-based approach as outlined in the statement. That is because a provider will be under pressure to get a participant a job, even though it may not be of a meaningful standard. Will the Minister tell me what he is doing to ensure that the standard and quality of work that is on offer reflects meaningful employment that is not menial?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. I fully understand his and some of his colleagues' reservations and that it is easy to be cynical about these types of exercises. I want to try to reassure him again by stressing that we have sought to learn the lessons from the work programme in Great Britain. This is not the work programme from Great Britain being extended to Northern Ireland; this is a bespoke Northern Ireland employment programme. We are doing things differently to Great Britain. I highlight that we will have a draft service guarantee for the people who will be going through Steps 2 Success. We are happy to share the current draft of that guarantee with members of the Committee and, indeed, with Members of the House, to reassure them of the level of engagement that is involved. In common with what I said to the Member's colleagues, this is not about employers picking off the easier cases and letting people simply sit neglected in the system; there will be requirements for regular engagement with advisers, as well as encouragement and incentives to address those people who have real barriers. It will also ensure that the opportunities that will be provided to clients will be real and meaningful.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before calling the next Member, I ask Members to please check their mobile phones. At least one is interfering with the system. I am sure that we would not want Hansard destroyed, would we?

Ms Lo: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I commend him very much for the very thorough process that he undertook to review and revise the programme. I believe that it is much improved.

The Minister mentioned that there will be three contract areas instead of one. Where are those areas geographically, and what is his rationale for dividing them into three?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her comments and questions. At one stage, we were minded to go for Northern Ireland as a single contract area, with two or three providers potentially in competition with each other. That would have been more consistent with the situation in Great Britain, where there are about 10 contract areas, each with two providers covering a large geographical area. Equally, we could not stay with the current 10 areas, which was an inefficient system with too much money being spent on management and administration rather than on front line delivery. There was concern about moving to a single contract area, so on balance, we felt that moving to three contract areas with one provider in each would be a better localised solution. We will perhaps not achieve the same economies of scale that can be found elsewhere in the United Kingdom, but we will provide a better service that will be more linked in with the local supply chain and that will take account of the nature of our current jobs and benefits offices.

The three contract areas will also reflect district council boundaries. I am happy to share the detailed breakdown with Members. In essence, there will be a region around greater Belfast that will include the council areas of Belfast, North Down, Ards, Castlereagh and Lisburn. There will be a northern region that will include the council areas of Strabane, Derry, Limavady, Coleraine, Moyle, Ballymoney, Ballymena, Larne, Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and Antrim. There will be a southern region for the council areas of Fermanagh, Omagh, Magherafelt, Cookstown, Dungannon, Craigavon, Armagh, Banbridge, Newry and Mourne, and Down. Hopefully, that gives Members a sense of what we are talking about for the three new areas.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 2) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

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

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 2) Bill at this stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Pupil Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next two items of business are motions to approve statutory rules that deal with matters relating to the disclosure of pupil and higher education student information. There will be separate debates on each of the statutory rules. However, the Minister and Members will be allowed some latitude to address the broad policy issues that are common to both sets of regulations during the first debate. I hope that the House finds this useful.

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

That the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Pupil Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Mr Deputy Speaker, as you pointed out, the second motion is very similar to the first one. Members of the Assembly, the two sets of regulations that come under your consideration today are part of a wider programme of work to utilise existing government information for the production of population and social statistics. The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 created a non-ministerial Department, the Statistics Board, to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good. The Act extends to Northern Ireland, and these regulations are made under powers contained in that Act.

The first set of regulations relate to pupil information from the annual school census, which has been identified as an important source of data that could be used to improve population and social statistics.

The school census is owned by the Department of Education. Regulations have been made in Westminster and Cardiff to allow the equivalent GB Departments to pass such data to the UK Statistics Authority. The regulations before Members are required to allow the Department of Education to pass that information through the Statistics Authority to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

The information to be shared is simple demographic data. Although the regulations will allow access to personal information, it is forbidden to publish any information that could identify an individual, and the data must be held under conditions of strict security. The regulations were considered by the Committee for Finance and Personnel and the Committee for Education, and no objections were raised. Therefore, I recommend that the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Pupil Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his short opening remarks. As he outlined, the regulations will enable the Department of Education to disclose selected demographic information from pupil records to the Statistics Authority for use by NISRA in developing population statistics.

Given the cross-departmental relevance of the legislation, Committee members agreed to seek comment from the Committee for Education before coming to a final view. The Committee noted the significance of robust statistics, especially relating to the Barnett formula, and queried whether the proposals were anticipated to lead to any change in what has occurred in any previous collection of data. A NISRA official confirmed that no changes were anticipated.

The Committee also noted correspondence from the Committee for Education, which indicated that it was content with the policy proposals contained in the SL1 and that the proposed rule be made. After consideration, the Committee confirmed that it had no comment to make on the policy proposals at that stage.

The Committee, at its meeting on 5 June, formally considered the statutory rule and the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. After technical scrutiny, the Examiner raised no issues, and the Committee therefore agreed to recommend that the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Pupil Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, on behalf of the Finance and Personnel Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Wilson: This is a fairly easy one for me today. I thank both Committees for their work on the regulations. They are helpful regulations, in so far as they will improve the information available between censuses on population movement and change etc. That is useful for informing lots of government decisions. I thank the Chairmen and Committees for their scrutiny, and I am pleased that the officials were able to satisfy them that the information will be secure and used only for the purpose that has been set out, which is to give us a better understanding of changes in population and social conditions. Therefore, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Pupil Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Higher Education Student Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

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

That the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Higher Education Student Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

This is a bit like a repeat of a BBC programme. I am asking the Assembly to affirm the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Higher Education Student Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.

12.15 pm

This is the same as what we will be doing with pupil information, except that these regulations cover information that is available on students who attend higher education colleges. The regulations' purpose is to give us important data on population changes and social statistics. They have already been made in Westminster to allow the equivalent GB Departments to pass on the data to the Statistics Board, and the regulations simply enable the Department for Employment and Learning to pass on information to the Statistics Board and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

As with the first set of regulations, the information shared is simply demographic data. Although the regulations will allow access to personal information, I assure the Assembly that it is forbidden to publish any information that could identify an individual. The data will be held under the strictest security conditions, which have been discussed with the Committee for Finance and Personnel. The regulations have been discussed by that Committee and, in this case, the Committee for Employment and Learning, and no objections were received. Therefore, I recommend that the regulations be affirmed by the Assembly.

Mr McKay (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. As the Minister outlined, this is pretty straightforward. The Committee sought comment from the Committee for Employment and Learning this time, as opposed to the Committee for Education, and the Committee for Employment and Learning indicated that it was content with the policy proposals contained in the SL1 and that the proposed rule be made. After consideration, the Committee for Finance and Personnel confirmed that it had no comment to make on the policy proposals at that stage.

The Committee formally considered the statutory rule at its meeting on 5 June, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. He raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. The Committee therefore agreed to recommend that the regulations be affirmed by the Assembly. On behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Wilson: Without further ado — since there is no debate on the motion and since Members seem to be satisfied that it is a useful exchange of information — I ask the Assembly to support the motion that the regulations be affirmed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 (Disclosure of Higher Education Student Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Public Bodies (Abolition of the Registrar of Public Lending Right) Order 2013: Assembly Consent Motion

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I beg to move

That this Assembly consents to the Public Bodies (Abolition of the Registrar of Public Lending Right) Order 2013 in the form of the draft laid before the UK Parliament on 8 May 2013.

Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Public Bodies (Abolition of the Registrar of Public Lending Right) Order was laid in draft form at Westminster on 8 May 2013 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

The Public Bodies Act 2011 allows British Ministers to abolish, merge or transfer functions of public bodies listed in the appropriate schedules. The proposal to abolish this body was included in the schedule to that Act. A consent motion is required because section 9 of the Public Bodies Act requires, where appropriate, the consent of the devolved legislatures before an order can be made under the Act.

As part of the reform programme, the British Government are seeking our consent to abolish the Registrar of Public Lending Right and to transfer that function to the British Library. The Registrar of Public Lending Right is a small body that makes payments to authors and illustrates when their books are borrowed from public libraries. It is a low profile but very important function that underpins book lending by our library service. This is essentially an administrative change that will have no effect on the operation of the public lending right scheme in the North. Even though this is a devolved matter, we do not make a financial contribution to the scheme, and that will continue to be the case. I commend the motion to the House.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): As

already indicated, the Assembly agreed a legislative consent motion on 7 March 2011 in relation to the Public Bodies Bill. Section 9 of the now Public Bodies Act 2011 requires, where appropriate, the consent of the devolved Administrations before an order can be made under the Act. Hence, the consent motion that is before us today.

At its meeting on Thursday 23 May 2013, the Committee considered correspondence from the Minister advising of her intention to seek the consent of the Assembly to a draft order being made under the Act. As outlined, the draft order relates to the abolition of the Registrar of the Public Lending Right and the transfer of its functions to the British Library.

The Minister has advised that the draft order proposes an administrative change aimed at creating savings and will not result in any change in service received either by authors or by the library service here. At its meeting on 23 May, the Committee indicated that it was content for the Minister to proceed with laying the statutory instrument. At the Committee's meeting on 6 June 2013, members formally considered the statutory instrument and agreed to it. That is reflected in the minutes of that meeting. On behalf of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I support the motion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Go raibh maith agat arís. I thank the Chair of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee for her response on behalf of the Committee. As the Chair outlined, and as outlined in my correspondence and accepted by the Committee, this is essentially an administrative change that will have no effect on the operation of our public lending right scheme. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly consents to the Public Bodies (Abolition of the Registrar of Public Lending Right) Order 2013 in the form of the draft laid before the UK Parliament on 8 May 2013.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, 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.

The sitting was suspended at 12.23 pm.

On resuming (Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Regional Development

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As Mr Gregory Campbell is not in his place, I call Mr Adrian McQuillan.

North West 200

2. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Regional Development how many times he met the organisers of the North West 200 before this year's event to ensure that the road closures order would give greater flexibility to ensure that racing was not disrupted. (AQO 4318/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): At the outset of Question Time, as it is the first opportunity that I have had, I place on record on behalf of myself, my party and, I hope, the whole House a tribute to the iconic images that Northern Ireland has benefited from as a result of the G8 summit. I think that the whole House will share that sentiment, particularly in light of the very impressive contribution made by Hannah Nelson yesterday at the Waterfront Hall in the presence of President Obama.

After the washout of the 2011 North West 200 race, I met representatives of the 2 and 4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Ltd on 15 June and 7 September 2011. Subsequent to that, my officials met the group on two more occasions, the last being on 26 November 2012, when the group agreed to provide more details concerning aspects of its proposals, which included a broad range of issues. At my request, I recently again met representatives of the 2 and 4 Wheel Motorsport Steering Group Ltd and the North West 200 on 28 May 2013 to discuss the cancellation of races at this year's event.

Looking ahead, I have advised Executive colleagues that I will seek their agreement to introduce a single-purpose Bill to amend existing legislation to provide for contingency practice or race days in the event of bad weather. To enable those arrangements to apply to the 2014 racing season, I will seek Executive agreement to progress the Bill by

accelerated passage. I trust I will have the support of all in the House in doing so.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer, which I certainly welcome. Does he agree that the main issue with the road closure order is the need to vary it so that racing can happen on whatever day has the right sort of weather?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his encouraging remarks. I believe that there will be widespread approval for the measure that I intend to propose, after further consultation with the organisers of the race. I will seek Executive approval for policy clearance to draft a Bill by the end of June 2013 and publish it as part of the public consultation; to have my officials brief the Regional Development Committee in early July; and to carry out public consultation during the summer in order to return to the Executive in September to seek approval to introduce the Bill and have it progressed by accelerated passage. My officials are continuing discussions with representatives of the sport to confirm the most appropriate policy approach to be taken.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht an fhreagra sin. Minister, I know a group of bikers who have come for the past three years and seen only one day's racing. Have you given any consideration to the groups of bikers who come maybe from Europe and certainly from England and abroad? Have you considered perhaps having some racing on Sundays?

Mr Kennedy: The promoters have not raised that issue with me at this point. Interestingly, however, the legislation is silent on Sunday racing. It is up to the promoters of road races to decide which days they want a road closure order to cover. It is also the promoters' responsibility to ensure that there is effective notification of proposed road closures to those most likely to be affected by them.

The Isle of Man has its own road racing legislation, but there is no corresponding provision in the Northern Ireland order, and it is not proposed to mirror that arrangement in the Northern Ireland legislation.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure he realises that we are all revved up about this issue. The Minister appreciates that this is not about a one-day race or the one day that it takes place; it is about an event that brings tourists into not just the triangle but

across Northern Ireland and, indeed, Donegal for a week or more. Can the Minister assure us that there will be an opportunity for the local community to be engaged in whatever changes are needed to ensure that the race has flexibility and that the race organisers continue to enjoy the support of the people who live there and who, after all, are the most important people?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for accelerating that question to me. It is crucial that the event retains the huge public support that it already has, particularly from residents and inhabitants of the area. The full potential of the north-west is, perhaps, still completely unrealised. That is why I hope that, as part of the discussions, we can look at the issue of support funding for an international event that brings so many tourists to the north-west, particularly, to enjoy the sights and sounds of the north-west, particularly. That combination will be crucial in moving forward and in ensuring that everyone has a contribution to make.

Mourne Coastal Route

3. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment regarding the Mourne coastal route signage issue, which advises visitors that the route is unsuitable for coaches. (AQO 4319/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am fully aware of the specific issues surrounding the signing of the route for coaches. Recently, I met and listened to concerns from representatives of the Kilkeel Development Association and, indeed, my party colleague in the area, Councillor Harold McKee, and others, regarding the advisory wording included on some of the signs which indicate parts of routes that would be unsuitable for large coaches. I have put in place arrangements to have that wording removed from signs as soon as possible. I have agreed to that change as I believe it is better for the Tourist Board to provide supporting literature that will allow coach operators to plan their routes through the Mournes in the full knowledge that stretches of routes may be difficult to negotiate in a large coach. The production of literature showing routes for coaches is certainly not uncommon in other parts of the United Kingdom and is used for driving trails in the Yorkshire Dales and Dartmoor.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for that, and I welcome the response. Minister, will you give

this accelerated passage for the tourist market for this summer? Will the signs be updated ASAP?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his positive response. I have instructed officials to make arrangements to have the wording removed from signs as soon as possible. I remain hopeful that the work will be completed in the next week or two, prior to the commencement of the summer holidays.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply thus far, and I too welcome the wording being removed. On the wider issue of the roads being unsuitable for coaches, will the Minister instruct his Department to look at the roads? We are talking about one of the nicest coastal routes in Ireland. It would be a pity if large parts of it were unsuitable for coaches, as we are bringing in more coaches to the area.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Of course, part of the beauty of the Mournes is their unspoilt nature. It would not do for me to provide a motorway on some of those locations. The Member will know, of course, that rural roads receive ongoing structural and maintenance repair, and that remains the case for roads in the area of the Mournes. However, I accept the point that he makes. I think the Mournes is one of the key areas in the overall tourism product that Northern Ireland has much to shout about, and so I hope that the contribution that I am making to that with regard to signage is a positive one.

Mr Hussey: I am sure the Minister is aware that some of the traffic that comes into this part of the world comes from the Republic. Perhaps, at this stage, Minister, you would take the opportunity to reaffirm your commitment to the "Welcome to Northern Ireland" signs.

Mr Kennedy: I am very grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It is certainly not a plant, because I do not have an answer for it.

The "Welcome to Northern Ireland" signs express a welcome to Northern Ireland. How pleased we have been in recent days to welcome international visitors and important politicians, their entourages and their colleagues. The feedback on the G8 summit and on Northern Ireland has, I think, been very good. Iconic images going out all over the world can only be a positive thing for Northern Ireland tourism and branding Northern Ireland

as a potential destination. I think that "Welcome to Northern Ireland" signs enhance that.

DRD: Together: Building a United Community

4. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an assessment of his Department's responsibilities under the Together: Building a United Community strategy. (AQO 4320/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Transport is central to a more inclusive, shared and integrated society. I am pleased that the Together: Building a United Community strategy recognises the importance of the work being carried out across my Department to the development and maintenance of good relations. In particular, I welcome the acknowledgement of the contribution of mobility and connectivity to the creation of a more united and prosperous community. The work I have taken forward on making public transport more accessible and designing transport networks such as the rapid transit scheme will bring communities together and ensure access to key services and facilities. However, there is much more to be done to build on the framework and vision established by the strategy. I am, therefore, pleased that I have secured the agreement of my Executive colleagues to a detailed discussion of the strategy at our meeting on 27 June 2013.

Mr Dickson: Minister, you referred to the iconic scenes of Northern Ireland in the past few hours. Sadly, some of those scenes have been marred by illegal and unlawful flags and other emblems flying from lamp posts and properties that are under your control and responsibility. In building the united community strategy, what actions will you take to attempt to have those flags removed?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Of course, he will know that my Department's policy, which has been approved by previous Ministers, does not endorse or support the unauthorised use of departmental property for any purpose. That includes the erection of roadside shrines to terrorists, for instance. However, the Department must also take into account the safety of those who are asked to undertake removal and the risk of escalating the problem. Unauthorised memorials on the properties of the Department's arm's-length bodies are matters for the boards of those organisations.

With regard to the removal of flags from lamp posts, my Department has signed up to the joint protocol on the display of flags in public areas. It is generally not perceived to be the lead agency under that protocol. PSNI, OFMDFM, the Housing Executive and DSD are better placed to assume that lead role in arranging for the removal of flags and emblems through their contact with community groups, local elected representatives and other relevant contacts. My Department's main role under the protocol, when called upon by the lead agency, is to provide the access equipment and the resources to remove unwanted flags when agreement has been reached that they should be taken down and the local community is unable to gain access to them easily. The onus is, of course, on working with local communities, as the Member will understand.

Mr McDevitt: I welcome the Minister's assertion that sustainable transport does indeed play a significant role in bringing communities together. Given that it is the beginning of Bike Week, can he tell us specifically what steps he hopes to take in the next few months to make cycling one of the ways in which we will be able to bring people together in this region?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I suspect that he, rather shamelessly, wants me to mention him for having won the MLA bike race for the third time in four years. He will correct me if I am wrong. In fact, he is good at that.

I commend Bike Week to Members. I thank those who participated in the G8 trophy event this morning and hope that everybody is sufficiently recovered. Cycling represents an opportunity for people to find benefits, either for health reasons or in helping the environment, and to show that it is possible to use alternative modes of transport. As Minister, I have attempted to do that, and I will continue to roll forward with it as we seek to improve facilities for bike users and cyclists on the roads in our towns and local areas.

2.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I suspect that, if there had been a stretching championship, the Member might have won that as well.

I call Mr Danny Kinahan. Let us stick to the subject.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much. I will stick to the subject. I am glad that the Minister has secured discussion on DRD's role in Together:

Building a United Community. Will he detail whether there are any new issues for DRD in the strategy?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. Indeed, the strategy reflects the importance of my existing transport and planning policies and programmes in the promotion of good relations. There is a commitment to ensure that future funding is directed on the basis of the themes in the strategy. If this were to result in the allocation of additional resources to the Department, I would be happy to consider new or additional transport initiatives.

Road Building

5. **Mr Ross** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much his Department has spent on road building in the last 12 months. (AQO 4321/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: In the past 12 months, my Department has spent in the region of £62 million on major strategic road improvements and £10 million on local transport and safety measures, of which £4.7 million was on minor network development schemes and projects for Belfast on the Move. Within those figures, over £4 million has been spent on the A2 Shore Road widening scheme at Greenisland. That scheme started in March 2013 and is proceeding very well, with minimal disruption to the travelling public. It remains on target for completion in June 2015.

My Department received specific funding for the A5 dual carriageway project. Following the recent ruling on the scheme, I wrote to the Finance Minister on 9 May 2013 to declare a reduced budget requirement for the 2013-14 year. In my view, it is essential that we quickly redeploy that reduced requirement to provide support to the construction sector and the local economy at this most difficult time. I consider expenditure on roads to be a specific example of activity that improves vital infrastructure and facilitates short- and long-term economic growth, while providing much-needed local employment.

Mr Ross: The Minister, in his answer, alluded to the fact that the money for the A5 will not be used for that project and that he wants to redeploy that money into other projects that have been suggested by him and his party colleagues. How many of the alternatives projects that have been suggested are procurement-ready and have had vesting completed?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member. I have to correct his interpretation of my remarks. I have made it clear and continue to make it clear that the A5 scheme has been delayed; it has not been abandoned. The Member will know that it remains an Executive priority. It is important that not all our eggs are in one basket any more. I inherited that situation when I became roads Minister. To deal with that very issue and looking at financial allocations, there are schemes that I want to bring forward. They might currently be described as procurement-ready but not shovel-ready. They include the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme; the Magherafelt bypass; the A55; and the A26 Glarryford scheme along the Frosses Road. Those are in the next wave of strategic schemes to be carried out. I hope that the Member and his party, at Executive level particularly, will give me the necessary assurance and the finance to bring forward other schemes so that this Executive do not have to hand back money to the Treasury.

Mrs Overend: Can the Minister detail when it will be possible to commence the alternative schemes that he mentioned ahead of the A5?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question, and I have no doubt that she will continue her interest in not only the A6 scheme but the Magherafelt bypass scheme. In general, Members will know that it takes around a year to procure a major road scheme, and, as I have outlined, there are several schemes in the strategic road improvement programme that have been advanced through their statutory procedures with a view to proceeding to procurement, subject to approval of the final business case. As I have said, they include the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway, the A31 Magherafelt bypass, and the A55 Knock Road widening in Belfast. In addition, proposals to provide dual carriageway on the A26 between Glarryford and Drones Road were examined by a public inquiry last autumn. Subject to the outcome of the public inquiries, it could be possible to commence construction on these schemes late next year. It is important that other schemes that may be in a position to be progressed ahead of the A5 are given full consideration by the Executive.

Mrs McKeivitt: Is the Minister concerned about the deterioration in road maintenance? Has there been an increase in insurance liability claims in the past 12 months?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. The impact of the

winter conditions in successive years has led to a concern about the roads that we are responsible for improving and maintaining. Aside from building new roads, that is an important consideration that I have. It is estimated that approximately £122 million a year needs to be spent on structural maintenance to maintain the network that we have. That is a challenge, and I can tell you that, in the initial allocations from the Finance Minister, I was not in receipt of anything near that amount. However, I am very hopeful that, through the June monitoring process and the fact that I have offered up capital that might have been spent on the A5 scheme, my Department will benefit from an additional allocation to help maintain our roads. As I travel around Northern Ireland, I see the impact of the winter conditions and the overall condition; it concerns me, and rightly so. Therefore, as roads Minister, I want to make the strongest arguments to bring into my Department moneys and resources that we can use to deal with those defects.

Road Resurfacing: Newtownabbey Borough Council Area

6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the carriageway resurfacing schemes that Roads Service has scheduled in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area during the current financial year. (AQO 4322/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department has one resurfacing scheme currently scheduled in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area during the remainder of the current financial year. It is anticipated that this scheme at Shore Road, Whiteabbey, will be completed during the summer months. A further resurfacing scheme within the 2013-14 programme on the Old Carrick Road from Doagh Road to Carrntall Road has already been completed. My Department also completed some 7.4 lane kilometres of resurfacing in the Newtownabbey Borough Council area during the 2012-13 financial year. That included four major schemes at Beverley Road, Antrim Road, Monkstown Avenue and Station Road. In total, approximately £3.5 million was spent on structural maintenance in 2012-13, including carriageway and footway resurfacing and patching.

For this financial year, my Department has been allocated £62 million against a currently assessed requirement of £130 million. As I said, to address the shortfall, my Department has made a bid in the June monitoring round for

additional funding for structural maintenance. I hope that the Member will support the bid, which will allow me to enhance the road surfacing programmes across all council areas.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his very comprehensive answer. Over recent months, utility companies have done a lot of work in the Glengormley and Cloughfern area, and they have left footpaths and roads in a rather undesirable condition. Does the Minister have any plans to review the criteria for the reinstatement of roads after utility companies have finished digging up the roads and footpaths?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for her supplementary question. She raises an important issue in which I take an interest because I am concerned when I hear reports of utility companies disrupting surfaces or not leaving them in an appropriate condition. There are agreements with the utility companies, including times by which they are expected to complete work to a satisfactory standard, following inspection from Roads Service officials, who check that the quality of the reinstatement is as it should be. If the Member has set examples, I would be happy to hear from her about them so that we can carry out further investigations.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans for resurfacing work on the Castlefin Road in Castlederg?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for her question. She may be shocked by this, but I did not anticipate that Castlefin Road, Castlederg, would feature at Question Time. I am happy to provide the Member with an update as quickly as possible.

Translink: Accounts

7. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister for Regional Development when the 2012-13 accounts for Translink will be laid before the Assembly. (AQO 4323/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: As in previous years, the annual accounts of Translink for 2012-13 will be laid before the Assembly before the summer recess. At this stage, we aim to have them laid by 4 July. We lay the annual report and accounts in the Assembly in accordance with the guidance on the procedures for presenting and laying the combined annual report and accounts, which is that the accounts should be

laid as soon as possible after the auditor has signed the accounts — normally two weeks later. The 2011-12 Translink accounts were laid before the Assembly on 6 July 2012, and the 2010-11 accounts were laid on 29 June 2011.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is he concerned that Translink is giving press briefings to individual hand-picked journalists before it lays its accounts before the Assembly and, I assume, the Department? Will the Minister give an undertaking that Translink and his departmental officials will answer questions about the 2011-12 accounts? It appears that Translink has considerable reserves. It states that there is £50 million "other" reserves, but there is no explanation of what those are.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I know that he and the Committee have recently been exercised on the issue. I will meet Translink senior executives later in the week and will raise the Member's initial concern with them.

Part of the debate has been played out in Committee and in the local press. It is important to say that, as Minister, I am absolutely certain that there is no cosy relationship between me or the Department and Translink. Translink is put through its paces in an appropriate manner. That we are able at least to be civilised to each other after such things is a useful template for everybody to copy.

Let me also say that Translink has had a very successful past 12 months, with over 1.5 million more fare-paying journeys on bus and train services. More and more people are using the railways and, last year, passenger journeys reached almost 11.5 million. Rail fares in Northern Ireland have not increased in real terms since 2005 and bus fares here have fallen in real terms in that period. That is in sharp contrast to Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland.

We are carrying forward profits earned in 2012-13 to further invest in the business and keep fares as low as possible. We are working hard, and I think that some recognition should be given to Translink for the performance that it has been able to confirm at this point

2.30 pm

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Football Clubs: Antrim Borough Council Area

1. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how much has been invested in football clubs in the Antrim Borough Council area in the last five years. (AQO 4332/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for his question. As the Member will know, Sport NI has primary responsibility for the distribution of funding for sport. Over the past five financial years, Sport NI has provided almost £230,000 of Exchequer funding to football clubs in the Antrim Borough Council area. Furthermore, I made a bid to the Executive last year for additional funding towards a programme aimed at promoting equality and tackling poverty and social exclusion through sport. In 2012-13, the IFA received £500,000 through that programme, and that has benefited football clubs across the North, including those in the Antrim area, through a range of projects and initiatives. In the Member's constituency of South Antrim, Crumlin United Football Club received almost £230,000 for a 3G pitch and floodlights, and the Greenisland Football Club received over £4,000 to purchase football equipment.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer and welcome the money that has been invested. Will the Minister use her good offices to see what more money can be delivered to the south Antrim area given the underinvestment there and the strong provision needed for football?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will certainly take that on board. The Sport Matters monitoring group, which I think Antrim Borough Council is represented on, looks at the Sport Matters strategy. It looks at the lack of provision and how collectively, even through other Departments, we can try to bridge some of the gaps.

I agree that many areas, including, as I am sure the Member would argue, his council area, have a greater need for facilities to increase sports provision. Given our budgetary constraints, we are looking at other ways of working better together to provide much-needed facilities in those areas. I am happy to hear any suggestions that the Member may

have. I am really keen to try to get as many people as possible involved in sport.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer and her Department for the funding for Crumlin and Greenisland. Is there any possibility of funds coming from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's (OFMDFM) Together: Building a United Community initiative? That could help the Minister to expand not only football but all the other sports that would get people to share things.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was delighted that sport was mentioned as an area in which more provision could be made. In response to the question, where we can work collectively to try to bridge the gaps, that is better. The statement had a greater focus on access for people with disabilities, and I think that the Member would agree with that. I am not excluding that, and there is certainly more room for improvement.

I am happy to look at every opportunity that is available to me now and at potential opportunities, even from a cross-departmental point of view, to try to get better facilities and better participation in sport.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Will the Minister tell me what live funding opportunities are available to soccer clubs across the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that Sport NI has no live funding applications or programmes that soccer clubs can apply to. It is at the early stage in the process of developing two new capital programmes to support community and club performance around sporting facilities' needs. I anticipate that some of the proposals will be brought forward over the coming months. It is important that we look for new opportunities, particularly as we approach the next comprehensive spending review (CSR) period, when we will all be looking at how we can enhance sport provision across the board.

Mr Lyttle: Why have the Sport NI stadia safety, community capital and places for sport funding streams been closed to amateur football clubs since December 2010?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will appreciate that another Minister took that decision. I have received concerns from a number of people involved, and not exclusively from those in soccer but in sport across the board. Bear in mind that we are where we are, and that is not

a good place to be. As I said to other Members, we are actively looking at what we can do, and not just across each Department. We are also looking at the potential for new programmes to be brought forward. As I said, those programmes are in the very early stage of development. Sport NI has identified that as a gap. I look forward to seeing what the proposals are, sharing them with the Committee and then with the rest of the Members.

Marching Bands: Uniforms

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, in light of the recent report by RMS McClure Watters into the 'Socio-economic Impact of the Traditional Protestant Parading Sector in Northern Ireland' and as £55 million of economic and social benefits are generated each year by the sector, would she fund new uniforms for some of the 660 marching bands, as this would also boost the local textiles industry. (AQO 4333/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of the research findings in the report that was funded by the Department for Social Development (DSD). I believe that the social impact of marching bands and other expressions of cultural interests are just as important as any economic impacts. My Department, through the Arts Council and the Ulster-Scots Agency, offers funding to marching bands from all communities to maintain and develop the level of music-making in the sector. My Department is primarily concerned with the funding of musical instruments and tuition, to ensure that artistic expression can be celebrated and embraced. It does not fund the provision of uniforms.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for her response. Given the decline in the textile industry in Northern Ireland, and the positive impact that marching bands have for good in many areas here, will the Minister at least consider working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and DSD to explore further the possibilities that I raised?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to meet any Minister at any time about any subject. All Ministers are charged with meeting the public interest test. There is clearly an interest here in providing musical instruments and tuition, because those foster skill and talent. Uniforms for bands is always seen as a private thing that clubs bring forward, but I am happy to meet any Minister to see what, if anything, can be advanced.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. What funding is available to marching bands and what penalties, if any, will bands that participate in antisocial and sectarian behaviour face?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding for marching bands is fairly significant. Between that provided by the Arts Council, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and the Ulster-Scots Agency, the funding has been significant. For example, in the past three years, the Arts Council has provided over £600,000 for musical instruments. As well as that, over £26,000 has come from the Awards for All small grants programme, and over £650,000 for musical tuition was provided through the Ulster-Scots Agency.

The bands who apply to the Arts Council and Ulster-Scots Agency know that any involvement in antisocial or sectarian behaviour is part of the ongoing monitoring process, and if evidence of such involvement is found, both agencies will deal with it robustly.

Mr Dallat: Given yesterday's events, and the lecture by the US President, has the Minister any ideas or incentives by which she could encourage marching bands from both traditions to march together?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have to say, in short, no, I do not have any ideas. It would certainly be an interesting collaboration. I know that some bands, particularly in small rural areas, are part of the community, regardless of how we feel about the bands, their music or anything else. I believe that there have been certain events at which bands have come together, not to collaborate but to display their music and talent. The challenge lies in supporting the development of music and talent in bands rather than focusing on any other area.

Mr McCarthy: The Minister told the Assembly that her Department has significant funds for marching bands. The Ballywalter Flute Band in my constituency has been invited to represent Northern Ireland at London's Lord Mayor Show in the near future. Does the Minister have some funding that could be directed to that area so that they can put on their best and get to London for the show?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I haven't any money on me. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McCarthy: I did not ask you that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, but you may as well have, Kieran; to be honest. To be frank, the Member is well aware of the Arts Council, its structures, its committees, its lobbies and all the rest. It surprises me he does not know that the first place to go is the Arts Council, but I wish the Ballywalter Flute Band all the best.

Casement Park: Social Clauses

3. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an overview of developments on the social clauses and investment in the community that arise from the Casement Park development. (AQO 4334/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Social clauses criteria have been agreed between the Department and the GAA for inclusion in the IST tender documentation. Socio-economic returns have been incorporated into the Casement Park tender documentation to include specific obligations on a successful contractor to deliver the following: significant opportunities for the long-term unemployed; significant opportunities for apprenticeships for those from areas in the sectors of society suffering greatest social need; the delivery of weeks and months of employment placement and opportunity for students; the delivery of supply chain development and the targeting of small and medium enterprises; the delivery of effective and ongoing engagement with the local community; and to undertake practical proposals to develop a wide range of social returns for areas and communities in the proximity of the projects. In addition, the Member will be aware that, with regard to our investment in the community, there will be a dedicated community space for projects that will bring much needed work and jobs to the area, which has not received an adequate amount of investment over the past years.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Príomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answer. Could she provide a summary of the agreed social clauses for the Ravenhill, Windsor and Casement Park projects?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will give a flavour of the Ravenhill project, and am happy to write to the Member on the rest, because they are quite detailed. For the Ravenhill project there is a contract to employ seven long-term unemployed people, create four new apprenticeships, to have 5% of the workforce in recognised apprenticeship schemes, to have two student placements and to have five

practical proposals post-contract, which will develop a wide range of social returns in the area. It is the same for Windsor Park. That contract includes the employment of 17 long-term unemployed people, the creation of nine new apprenticeships, to have two student placements and, again, to have practical proposals post-contract. I believe that a targeted initiative such as this will bring added value to stadia development in the community.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answer on social clauses. She will be aware of concerns among local residents in relation to the overall Casement project. Recently, a scale model of Casement Park was exhibited in the Westwood Centre. Were there any positive developments arising out of that to reassure residents in relation to the current concerns that, not unsurprisingly and naturally, they are expressing?

2.45 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: All Members have to support residents who have concerns and try to work through those. When those concerns are reasonable and we can do something about them, we should. The Member is right to say that there has to be a scale model, because that is a strict criterion of his colleague the Environment Minister when going forward for planning permission. I received a lot of positive feedback on that, particularly because I think the impression that people had, until they saw the model, was that it was going to be of a different size and specification.

There is an ambition to see what employment can be brought to west Belfast. We are still having discussions with the residents. I will be meeting them fairly soon, and I have met them before. I, my Department and the Ulster council of the GAA will be meeting them again, and that process will continue until the application process for planning permission closes in September.

Mr Copeland: Can the Minister confirm whether Casement Park is caught by the same European directive as Windsor Park in respect of potential illegality surrounding state aid?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will appreciate that I cannot go into detail on that because I am actually fighting challenges over state aid. However, as I have said in my legal argument, I believe that this instance of state aid for the stadia is totally permissible. I will certainly defend very robustly the contribution of DCAL

and the Executive for the development of all the stadia.

World Police and Fire Games

4. **Mr Spratt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 4335/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not know what happened there, but you shimmied very quickly, Jimmy. I thank the Member for his question. Following the outcome of the bracketing process, the company has confirmed that 56 sports will be offered during the games, and it is estimated that over 7,000 athletes will compete. As of 11 June, the total number of athletes to have registered for the games is 5,815, with an expectation of reaching over 7,000. The company has exceeded the target of £1.4 million of sponsorship, with a total amount of £1.6 million secured. The World Police and Fire Games schools packs were launched in October last year. They provide teachers with a comprehensive set of education resources to inform children and young people about the games and get them involved in the event throughout 2013. The company has also developed a social benefit strategy and a legacy plan to ensure the social inclusivity of the games, and has appointed three charity partners as part of that plan.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Minister for her answer. In relation to some of the negativity that is going around, particularly from one journalistic source, about the reduced numbers that were predicted, will the Minister give us some indication of the spin-off that is still expected from the 7,000 competitors and the people who will accompany them? The situation is good, given the present economic circumstances. Will the Minister and the Department be positive about the numbers that we have secured at present?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I share the Member's concerns. I experienced the same thing last year before the Olympic and Paralympic Games, particularly around the torch relay. I will not be petty, but there was a degree of eating humble pie by a certain section of the media after the success of that. The weather did not dampen people's spirits.

I expect people here, even though it is mainly based in Belfast, to come out and support the 7,000 athletes, plus their family members and friends who will accompany them. We will all give them the welcome that we are known for. There will also be a cultural programme, and

the work with schools is excellent. The places available for volunteering have been oversubscribed. We will give the visitors a good welcome and, not only that, we will make sure that they come back. I think that that is important. I look forward, all being well, if God spares us, when we all come back here in September, to seeing the slant that some people are going to have to put on the success of the World Police and Fire Games.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Will she outline, first, whether the lower number of athletes means that the organisers have failed to meet their targets and, if so, how can the Department work with them to ensure that those targets are met?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you very much for your question. There are many reasons why the number of athletes, in terms of one of the original targets, has not been met. The main thing is the recession, which has had a global impact. But, in fairness to the company, it has adjusted this and still provided.

It is worth putting the information in context, in answer to your question and the one that Jimmy Spratt raised. At the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics, 10,500 athletes competed in 26 sports, which cost around £9 billion. At next year's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, there will be an estimated 6,500 athletes in 17 sports, which is costing £523 million.

By comparison, with our contribution of almost £7 million for 56 sports for 7,000 athletes, the World Police and Fire Games are not just better value for money, given the concerns and questions that some people have. They will also provide a lasting legacy not just for 2013 but beyond for the services, schools and people that will be involved in the project.

Mrs McKevitt: I thank the Minister for her response and, in particular, her positive comments about the Games. This is our opportunity to showcase our region at its best, and she mentioned the volunteers and the huge response that the Games have received from the public, and how we are going to sell our brand. On a positive note, does she have the details of the opening and closing ceremonies of the World Police and Fire Games so that we can showcase that at its best?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The opening ceremony is going to be at the King's Hall. We are still working on

the closing ceremony. I appreciate the Member's sentiments and the consistency of her positive approach and that of other Members to the World Police and Fire Games.

As I said earlier, the fact that well over half the volunteers have been subscribed to the programme is itself a testimony. They will be involved, not just in the opening and closing ceremonies but in every aspect.

I am aware that one of the Member's colleagues has offered his services. I am not too sure what the World Police and Fire Games uniform looks like, but I know that he was eager to wear pink Lycra for the Giro d'Italia. I know and hope that Members of this House will be involved in the opening and closing ceremonies and some of the events that we are going to provide between 1 August and 10 August, and I look forward to seeing you all there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You should call Members by their proper names. Miss Judith Cochrane.

Mrs Cochrane: Question 6, please.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry, question 5?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry; my mistake, Judith. I call David Hilditch.

Sport: Female Participation

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she is taking to increase female participation in sports. (AQO 4336/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Political censorship, David; say nothing.

Females are significantly under-represented in sport in comparison with males. To help address the problem, my Department's strategy for sport contains a specific target to deliver a 6% increase in women's participation by 2019.

To ensure that that target is achieved and published, the Sports Matters action plan contains a series of actions that embrace a range of organisations across the sport and leisure sector, including promoting increased female participation through a range of departmental investments and encouraging other parties such as district councils and governing bodies of sports and clubs to do the same.

I have sought to promote female participation and success in sport publicly in a number of ways. I have been working very closely with the female sports forum, which aims to increase opportunities for women and girls to participate in sport.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her reply. The 'Sports Matters' document certainly highlights the deficit. This week, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure will be looking at the community sports hubs in Scotland. Does the Minister agree that the establishment of community sports hubs in Northern Ireland would present an ideal opportunity to develop female participation in team sports?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do, in short. The Scottish models have been looked at as exemplars for lots of things, and I have been looking at some of those issues, including the community hubs for sport, in the same way that the Committee looked at hubs for the creative industries. We need to look at collaborative approaches, but they need to be targeted and we need to put in the investment on a targeted basis.

The results should be, and have to be, better. There should be increased participation of females in sport, not just for DCAL but for social development, social inclusion and health reasons.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers. What organisations are contributing to the Sport Matters targets for increasing female participation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I met a delegation from Ulster Hockey, which is one member of the Female Sports Forum. There are many other members, including representatives of soccer, GAA, rugby and tennis. As I mentioned, district councils have been involved in the Active Communities programme. The Ulster council of the GAA is delivering a number of programmes, such as Gaelic 4 Mothers, recreational games for adults, Go Games, and coaching and development workshops.

The IFA has also done great work on expansion for junior girls' leagues and the growth of women's senior leagues. It has held open days to introduce girls to soccer, and it has delivered the Score pilot project, which provides clubs with the tools to enable them to encourage more girls to take part in sport.

Ulster Rugby, through its women's development officer, has delivered a number programmes, including Play Rugby Girls initiative and the Girls' Schools Cup. Sport NI is also working with a number of the governing bodies to support and develop the Female Sports Forum to try to get more women and girls involved in sport.

Pleasure Grounds: North Down

6. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when her Department received and will comment on the new draft pleasure ground by-law proposals for the North Down Borough Council area. (AQO 4337/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: That question has been transferred to the DOE, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Commonwealth Games: Queen's Baton

7. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department will promote and mark the arrival of the Queen's baton as part of the Commonwealth Games celebrations. (AQO 4338/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for promoting and marketing the arrival of the Queen's baton as part of the Commonwealth Games celebration rests in the first instance with the Commonwealth Games Council, which is the lead body for commonwealth sport here. I understand that NICGC, which has been engaging with the organising committee of the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games, is considering events to be held between 20 and 23 May 2014, when the baton relay will visit here. My Department, through Sport NI, will work closely with the NICGC as it takes forward its preparations and celebrations for the 2014 Glasgow games. Further details on events planned to promote and mark the arrival of the baton as part of the Commonwealth Games will be provided by NICGC nearer the time.

Mr Allister: We all recall the success of the Olympic torch relay and the enthusiasm of the Minister to be seen and be present when the torch arrived. Will we have the same enthusiasm and presence when the Queen's baton arrives in the run-up to the British Commonwealth Games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: To pass the baton back to the Member, I will be totally enthusiastic about supporting athletes, organisers, coaches and

families who are participating in the Commonwealth Games of 2014. To expect or suggest anything else is just churlish.

Miss M McIlveen: Following the success of the Olympic torch relay and the anticipated arrival of the Queen's baton in 2014 as part of the Commonwealth Games, will the Minister outline whether there will be a community-based relay event to mark the opening of the World Police and Fire Games this year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no details about a community relay event for the World Police and Fire Games. I am meeting the company to try to finalise that, because it has been suggested. However, we need to see details rather than outlines. It would be a good idea. Given the number of children and young people who are involved in volunteering in schools, it is really important that they are involved in a significant event like this.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Chris Hazzard is not in his place to ask question 8.

Rugby

9. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department is assisting in the development of grass-roots rugby. (AQO 4340/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry, what number?

Mr Hamilton: Number nine.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will give you any answer, just hold on. [*Laughter.*] Responsibility for the development of grass-roots rugby here rests in the first instance with the governing body of the sport, namely the Irish Rugby Football Union and its Ulster branch. Over the past five financial years, my Department, through Sport NI, has provided £2.8 million to rugby through a number of funding programmes to assist in the development of sport at grass-roots level.

3.00 pm

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given the recent success of the Ulster rugby team and the development of rugby in Northern Ireland, does she agree that the number of coaches operating in Northern Ireland is too low? Will she endeavour to work with Ulster Rugby to develop the number of coaches and spread that right across Northern Ireland so that our rugby players can have even more success?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Absolutely. I have been and will continue working with Ulster Rugby. At the minute, we are working very closely on the development of Ravenhill, and grass-roots development is included in that legacy. To be fair — I am not making a point — it needs to go outside grammar schools and include everybody. Some of the kids, even from different sporting codes, are now getting involved in rugby. That is a good thing, and I am sure that the Member agrees.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Dolores Kelly is not in her place.

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Assembly Commission what progress has been made in increasing the number of days on which the Union flag can be flown at Parliament Buildings. (AQO 4348/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. I want to be clear that the Commission has not set out to increase the number of days on which the Union flag will fly at Parliament Buildings. Instead, at a meeting of the Commission on 5 February 2013, the Commission tasked officials to bring back a report, following consultation with Assembly parties, to simply review the number of days on which the Union flag flies from Parliament Buildings; to detail a range of options; to set out how a process of public consultation could be carried out; and to outline the arrangements for carrying out an equality impact assessment (EQIA). There was to be no predetermined outcome. Parties were invited to submit written statements. The Assembly's Research and Information Service has analysed the responses, and a paper detailing a range of options on the way forward will be considered at the Commission meeting on 26 June.

Mr Allister: Previously, the Commission announced that, when it had received the representations of parties on 12 April, it would proceed to public consultation and an equality impact assessment. We are now more than two months beyond that date. Why is there feet-dragging on this important issue?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. What the Commission agreed was to detail a range of options and to set out how a process of public consultation would be carried out, including an EQIA, not to go ahead and proceed with that. We will look at a number of

options in the report when it is brought to us next week.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank Judith Cochrane for her answer. Does she agree that the Commission took a very wise position in June 2002 when it decided that, rather than the contentious issue of flags being part of its work, it should be dealt with by the political parties? Does she think that that is the best way forward and that any other suggestion or motion to the contrary undermines the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, particularly on parity of esteem?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, in 2000, the Commission agreed that the flags issue was a political matter that is best handled by the Assembly. However, the procedures of the Commission allow Members to bring a motion forward at any time. The Commission member brought that motion forward, and, as I said, options have been looked at. I have not seen the paper yet — I will see it next Wednesday — but one of the options may be to, for instance, ask the Assembly working group to look at this and take it forward.

Mr McGlone: To clarify, will the Commission leave it until the deliberations of the working group on flags and symbols, which was commissioned by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), are complete?

Mrs Cochrane: As I said, the Commission will look at the way forward on Wednesday. We will look at the options detailed, and I imagine that one of the options will be to await the outcome of the working group. At this stage, I cannot comment on exactly what the Commission will decide to do.

Mr Copeland: It seems that at least two different lists are used by different bodies to designate designated days. Can she explain the reasoning behind the differences between those two lists?

Mrs Cochrane: When the Assembly agreed to adopt a designated days policy, it was based on the draft flags regulations, and I can provide a list of those. The list of regulations is issued each year and is generally 15 days in total. There are exceptions, however. For example, the regulations permit the flying of the Commonwealth flag alongside the Union flag on Commonwealth day, and on Europe day, they permit the flying of the European flag alongside

the Union flag. The Assembly Commission operates within the existing statutory guidance for this area.

Assembly: Prompt Payment

3. **Mr Agnew** asked the Assembly Commission what percentage of invoices received in the past year were not paid within the 10-day prompt payment target. (AQO 4349/11-15)

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. On 1 December 2008, Mr Nigel Dodds MP, the former Minister of Finance and Personnel, announced a non-statutory prompt payment target for Northern Ireland public sector entities. At that time, the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) issued further guidance to accounting officers highlighting the commitment of Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments to the better payment practice code. Although it is recognised that the Assembly Commission is not an Executive Department, it is committed to applying best practice principles. So, to that end, this target has been applied from the date of its introduction.

During the previous financial year, from April 2012 to March 2013, 96.2% of all invoices were paid within the 10-day target, meaning that only 3.8% of invoices were not paid within that target time.

Mr Agnew: I thank Mrs Cochrane for her answers. Does she agree that, although there has been some bad practice in the private sector in delivering prompt payments to contractors and subcontractors, the public sector should lead by example in this? I certainly welcome the figures that she outlined; they are very positive. Does she agree that such figures need to be seen across Departments?

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, I do agree with you. We continually monitor this target, and the Assembly's finance office monitors and reviews it quarterly. In addition, each year the Commission publishes in the annual report and resource accounts its policy on payments to suppliers, including details on all third-party payments, as well as the performance against this and other targets. For the past four years since this target was introduced, the Assembly Commission has succeeded in paying between 95% and 96% of invoices within 10 days of their receipt.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank Judith Cochrane for her answer and welcome the figures. What specific measures are being taken to ensure that targets are also met?

Mrs Cochrane: The targets are met. I think that that is the answer that I have already given. We have the target, and we are hitting 96.2% along the way. In comparison with the other Departments, the Assembly Commission is aware that the Comptroller and Auditor General issued a report on financial auditing in November 2012. That report included a comparison of prompt payment performance across the Northern Ireland public sector as a whole. The report shows that the average 10-day prompt payment performance for Executive Departments for the 2011-12 financial year was 89%, with 93% being the highest performance by any single Department.

Assembly: Printers

4. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Assembly Commission whether any assessment of the high consumption of ink by the new HP printers has been carried out. (AQO 4350/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for his question. The IS Office, together with engineers from the HP printers supplier, have examined a number of devices that belong to Members. Their tests have concluded that the devices are operating correctly in line with the normal consumption of toner-based and industry-standard tests. It should be noted that the consumption of toner in any laser printer is very much dependent on the type of printing job that is submitted. For example, the use of colour in print jobs should be minimised to allow the best yields from the toner cartridges.

The use of "economy" mode can reduce the consumption of toner ink by up to 50%. I know that Assembly Commission staff have written to Members again to say that they would assist in ensuring that the printers are set at the correct mode and are updated. Assembly Commission staff have reissued guidance to constituency staff about the best and most efficient and effective ways to use printer consumables. Furthermore, as I said, the IS Office will visit any constituency office to update, brief and advise Members accordingly.

Prior to the implementation of printers in constituency offices, comparable cost studies were carried out that revealed that the consumables that the stationery and IT consumables supplier currently provides offer

the best value for money. Based on feedback from a survey of Members and staff that was issued prior to the purchase of the printers, the key concern was reliability of the printers. Most Members will recall that there were umpteen problems with the previous printers. Our staff had to maintain them regularly, which is why they were upgraded. The issues were addressed in a business case that IT developed for the project. The primary objective, therefore, was to provide offices with modern and reliable printer facilities.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Member for his response. There is clearly a problem, and I am grateful for the way in which the matter has been outlined by the Commission. However, I am not certain that the ink that we are using is value for money, which puts pressure on Members' allowances for stationery and consumables. It may be that the Commission will have to look at the issue and even go to the independent panel about it. Any additional measures that would help staff in constituency offices would be welcome.

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

Mr A Maginness: Will the Member and the Commission review the position further?

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. A number of Members have written formally to senior staff expressing concerns about the printers. I can understand that a number of Members are frustrated, given the independent panel's two separate determinations. One was to restrict and reduce the budget for consumables to £1,000, and, on top of that, there will be a reduction in Members' office costs allowance by £5,500, which most Members feel will have an adverse effect. That has compounded matters. Given that the panel is independent, I am not sure that the Commission has any role in lobbying for or championing that cause. It is up to all parties in the Chamber, and if they have concerns that the service that they provide at constituency level is being adversely affected, I encourage them to request a formal meeting with the independent panel.

Mr Spratt: I accept all that you said about the printers' quality and reliability compared with the old ones. Given the high cost of replacement cartridges for these machines, what examination was done? The cost has trebled or quadrupled at least. That needs to be examined to find out whether a similar product

can be bought at a better rate than is being offered to Members.

Mr P Ramsey: I share the Member's concerns. It is an ongoing issue that senior management reviews continually for any new tendering. The Member is correct. With the old printers, it cost around £30 to print 1,000 pages. With the new printers, the cost had doubled, but it has not tripled or quadrupled. That causes concern, and when there is a new procurement process, senior management will be conscious of that to try to get a better deal for Members. But I reiterate: the biggest problem facing Members is the independent panel's determination, which has significantly reduced the budget for consumables and, at the same time, reduced the office costs allowance.

Mr Hussey: In deciding which equipment to purchase, what matrix was used to ensure value for money over the life of a printer?

Mr P Ramsey: When the printers were originally commissioned, each constituency office received training. A full assessment was carried out on their viability, and there is no doubt about the quality of the printers is good.

There is a difficulty, and I accept that a number of Members have said so. This has been discussed a number of times at Commission meetings, and I had a meeting with the Director General about it.

The IS Office met several local suppliers to gain an understanding of leading manufacturers and the range of devices and features available in the current marketplace. As a result, the IS Office accepted offers of trial equipment from Hewlett Packard, Canon UK and, latterly, the manufacturers of the old printers, OKI Ltd. Those trials allowed the IS Office to evaluate new printing technologies and their potential application in the Assembly and at constituency level. The devices were assessed against the following criteria: ease of use, performance and additional functions, duplex toner-save and use of generic consumables. Each criterion varies across the range of devices. The trials were undertaken in June and July 2012 and involved making the loan devices available to key secretariat users. The printers are about high-speed, secure and confidential printing using PIN codes. I impress on the Member that there was a lot of evaluation leading up to this decision, and a lot of tests and trials of other equipment took place. These are the findings of our procurement and tendering team.

3.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Parliament Buildings: Roof Project

6. **Mr Rogers** asked the Assembly Commission whether the roof project will impact on Committee meetings. (AQO 4352/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Member for his question. The Assembly Commission has recently been granted planning approval to proceed with the roof project on the basis of technical solutions detailed in the stage D report presented by our design team. Although this solution is likely to be less disruptive than other options that were considered, there will be a major construction project such as we have not seen before, and it will not be without some noise or disruption to the House. The Commission has confirmed that no noise and disruption to plenary sittings will be tolerated during the construction period and is looking at options to mitigate disruption to Committee meetings. These include the possibility of relocating some or all meetings and further restricting the contractor's working arrangements to include Committee meetings. There are clear cost implications associated with placing restrictions on the contractor, and it is important that such restrictions are agreed in advance so that additional costs are not disproportionate. The Commission has requested further information that will allow it to determine and agree how best to deal with the noise and disruption. Members will be kept fully informed about any potential impact on Assembly business.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Member for his answer. Is it likely that Committee meetings will be held outside Parliament Buildings?

Mr P Ramsey: The Assembly Commission recently looked at a variety of options, including holding the meetings here. Some staff will be decamped from the Building because of the seriousness of the work and the disruption, particularly to level 4 of the Building. There is an option to hold all Committee meetings outside Parliament Buildings, and the cost of that is being tied down. There is also an option of retaining the integrity of Committee meetings within Parliament Buildings, but with that come restrictions on the contractor. We would have to ensure that there was no disruption and noise when Committee meetings were taking place because of a number of factors, including recording the meetings for Hansard and television. So we intend to hold a further Commission meeting, as Judith Cochrane

outlined. We need to resolve this before the summer to get the best deal for the House.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I wonder whether the Commission wants to start taking suggestions for alternative locations because a number of us would throw out various places. Will Pat outline to the House when he expects work to start and conclude on the roof project?

Mr P Ramsey: The project will last for about 12 months. We hope that work will commence soon after the summer recess and certainly before the new year. We are looking at alternative venues, but they bring increased costs, not just the cost of holding the meetings but the cost of hiring rooms and the transport of staff, including those in Hansard. All those options are being examined corporately by the Assembly Commission, and we will go for the option that means least disruption to Committees and brings value for money.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Assembly Commission.

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I was delayed in coming down to the Chamber and so was not in my place to ask the first question. I apologise to you and to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much.

Private Members' Business

Broadband: Rural Areas

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

Mr Flanagan: I beg to move

That this Assembly welcomes the investment by the Executive in improving access to high-speed broadband; recognises the continuing need for improvements in broadband infrastructure in many rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with local stakeholders to identify the areas that are in greatest need and to target investment on those areas to provide equitable broadband speed, cost and reliability.

Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to move the motion, which hopefully will not prove to be too contentious. I hopefully will not need 10 minutes, because I do not think that it needs 10 minutes.

The motion is very simple: it calls for improvements to broadband provision, particularly in rural areas. I do not think that anybody can be too upset about that. As a rural MLA, I, like many other elected representatives, receive regular complaints from citizens and businesses unable to receive the same standard of broadband as their urban counterparts. They feel that they are being left out of some of the investment that has taken place recently.

The starting point should be that we acknowledge and welcome the considerable investment that has been leveraged into the telecommunications infrastructure as a result of Executive funding. Broadband or telecommunications is not a transferred matter, so it is not the responsibility of the Executive. However, the Executive can make interventions where they feel that there is a need. That has been very positive and is largely welcomed. However, an awful lot of the frustration that has historically been out there is still there, and we need to reflect on that.

Very many areas are still in the Dark Ages when it comes to broadband infrastructure and

access to telecoms. I could spend the next five minutes listing the townlands, hamlets, villages and towns in my constituency that are simply cut off from the network, but, to Members' delight, I will not do that. We will be told by other contributors and by the Minister that there are viable alternatives to the now privatised entity that continues to receive millions of pounds of public funding and has considerably improved its network in recent years, particularly in the North of Ireland, thanks to proactive investment from government. That has not happened in Britain. For high-speed, superfast broadband, we are definitely to the fore across these islands, and that is to be welcomed. However, there is still the same problem as there has always been with rural access.

Coming from a telecommunications background, I know the existing alternatives fairly well. However, given their speed, the cost for consumers, the government intervention that would be required and the reliability of satellite mobile and the other forms of wireless technology, nothing really compares to fibre to the property (FTTP). However, it is far from fibre to the property that we are at the minute. I do not think that a figure has been calculated to see how much that would cost, and I do not think that we will see it any time soon. Recent improvements in fibre to the cabinet (FTTC) have made a considerable difference in many urban areas and just outside urban areas, but, once you get beyond the street lights of most towns, villages and cities, you do not really see the impact of that, and it has been left to alternative providers to fill the gaps.

On the latest technological advancements, we will see the roll-out of 4G in the coming period. I know that some operators have begun that process with investment in Belfast in recent months, and that will continue. Satellite provision continues to improve in speed and reliability, but it is still quite costly, and some people are dissuaded from switching to satellite because of the large sign-up and set-up costs. However, we have yet to see how the additional funding that has been secured for improving broadband provision will be used. The Executive and the British Government have allocated funds, but we have been told previously and, I presume, will be told this time that it will be left to the market to determine the best technology. To date, that approach has not solved all our problems despite the improvements that I have noted. I know that the Minister will go into more detail on that in her response, so I will not steal her thunder.

The hardest-to-reach areas are still without adequate service, but urban areas, which were already receiving over two megabytes per second, are now in receipt of over 70 megabytes per second, which is more than adequate for any household. We still have the anomaly that people living in the countryside cannot get broadband through their phone line. That is a source of frustration for many people. There is no equality in coverage. One of the main reasons for that is that we are dealing with private companies that are driven primarily by their shareholders and their desire to have a profitable outcome. That is where the Government need to intervene. The Government can take two approaches. They can take a carrot approach, whereby people are given financial or other incentives to invest in what would be termed non-profitable areas, or the Government need to use a stick, which can be done through better regulation and better targets being set by Ofcom and those being properly policed. We have to see how this will pan out. The European Commission and the European Parliament are setting targets for the British Government, and the Minister's telecommunications action plan and the Programme for Government talk about giving every household broadband of at least two megabytes by 2015. All the targets are there, but the main questions are "How will we get there?" and "How much will it cost?"

There is a feeling among rural dwellers that they are being treated as second-class citizens by telecommunications providers and that the policies and interventions of the Executive could be improved to better serve rural dwellers. Some changes could be made to ensure that the much-needed money would have a much greater impact.

We all know that it is very unlikely that rural properties will connect directly to the fibre network any time soon. One of the only ways that we would see that would be through the introduction of a universal service obligation if that were to be imposed on providers. To date, there is no mad clamour to introduce that. There has been some discussion about it in recent years, but that has not really progressed. As far as I am aware, the responsibility for doing so currently lies with the British Government, as do most telecommunications and broadcasting powers. Whether that remains the case and is in our best interests is something that we need to debate as an Assembly and as a society.

The whole concept of a universal service obligation is nothing new. It is something that we are well used to. It exists for landline

phones and postal services. If you look across the board at how people access services, communicate and manage their everyday life, you see that broadband is now an essential part of that. It is considered every bit as essential as both those services, and it should be delivered to every property adequately as regards speed, reliability and cost.

As regards solutions and technologies that would deliver high-speed broadband and reliable mobile phone coverage, DETI needs to give greater consideration, when the tender that it is working on is rolled out, to whether a greater point score can be given to providers who can provide broadband and mobile phone coverage in the one process. They are similar problems. The lack of mobile phone coverage is a completely separate debate, and we could delay the House for another hour and a half talking about that, so I will not go into the detail on that, except to say that, if the Executive go down the route of trying to invest to bring 2G mobile phone coverage up to an adequate standard, it is possible that it will still not be as good as the 4G service when it rolls out. So, it is my view that the money that the Executive put into mobile phone coverage from the mobile infrastructure project should be done as part of the roll-out of the 4G services, if that can be timed correctly.

I will speak briefly about my area and the much-rumoured telecommunications legacy from the G8 summit. Like, thankfully, all the trouble that was going to be caused, it has failed to materialise.

3.30 pm

The police erected a mast at the Lough Erne resort. Fortunately, that will remain; it is a very welcome addition. The temporary masts in Enniskillen town centre are unlikely to remain, and will not solve many of the problems in rural communities. From a local point of view, that is deeply disappointing, given the ludicrous promises made in advance of the G8 summit.

The motion calls on the Minister to work with local stakeholders. The Department recently carried out a consultation exercise that identified postcode areas in greatest need. There were a considerable number of responses to that consultation and its findings were made available to the Committee. It is good to see that the Department is looking at areas in greatest need. I will rest my case there.

Mr D McIlveen: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this subject. I have been lobbied heavily on this issue in my constituency of North Antrim. When it comes to broadband, we seem to have patchy coverage to say the least. This is an important issue for very many families in my constituency. It affects not just people working from home or in businesses, but regular people like me and you, dare I say it, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

It is very frustrating when connection speeds are so slow at times. However, there is something even more frustrating: broadband providers are treating everybody almost the same, regardless of the speed of the internet service that they receive. That was clearly demonstrated by correspondence that I received from one constituent:

"I live in rural North Antrim. I am writing to ask you what is currently being done by the NI Assembly to improve broadband connections for those of us currently without access to fibre-optic connections. Our connection speed at the above address is 0.5Mbps. I understand that the average connection speed in the UK is 7Mbps, with of course many others receiving much faster speeds.

In our household, I have a final year student at university, another student based across the water but studying here during the holidays and also a secondary school pupil. All of my children require good access to the internet for their studies. It is very frustrating to have to live with slow speeds on a day to day basis — even finding the contact details for my MLAs took 10 minutes due to the time taken to download photographs. At the same time we are still paying the same price for our connection as people receiving far faster broadband speeds."

That last point is crucial. That letter, like others, prompted me to continuously seek to improve broadband provision in my constituency. I am in regular contact with the internet service providers. I also periodically issue mail drops to keep constituents updated. Despite that, my constituent hit the nail on the head about the pricing of broadband when we do not receive the speeds that we would hope for.

I know that much is being done by the Department to tackle this issue, mainly from a broadband provision perspective, and I commend the Minister on that. I also commend her work on the next-generation broadband project and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) telecoms action plan.

Those initiatives have been effective in rolling out much better broadband capacity for our Province. However, a lot more is still to be done. I know that the Minister is aware of the challenges, but this is not an issue only for the Department; there is a private sector interest as well, and it has to step up to the mark in delivering the infrastructure required to provide us with much faster broadband, particularly in rural areas.

I commend and support the motion, and I look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the motion today. First, we need to acknowledge the advances that have been made in the extension of broadband infrastructure throughout the North in recent years, but there are many black spots, especially in our rural areas. The lack of modern ICT infrastructure in rural areas is one of the main messages I get from rural businesses and communities. Rural businesses need effective infrastructure if they are to be successful, to realise their potential and to contribute to economic growth, and to maximise their economic resilience by providing greater flexibility and competitiveness, supporting innovation, enabling business to do new things and to develop currently unknown services and applications, and supporting that competitive economy. In fact, there is a big rural/urban divide.

Minister, I know that Fermanagh is the centre of the universe today, but the same cannot be said for access to broadband. Recent announcements of 100-megabit technology that is offered in cabled areas and urban settings, while rural areas struggle to obtain even basic broadband services, help to illustrate the rate at which the digital divide is widening. The latest software is developed using that 100-megabit technology, and one can only imagine how it will function when you have to use it on a 0.5 megabit connection.

In reality, there are areas in Northern Ireland where fixed-line solutions are not possible, for technical and commercial reasons. Recent developments in mobile and satellite technology are welcome. The £5 million investment in rural broadband that was announced by the Agriculture Minister is a good start, but it is a basic service if rural businesses are to grow and prosper.

I am disappointed that our amendment, which called on the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to work with stakeholders as well, was not agreed for today. We cannot address the issue fully, as the Minister responsible for

rural affairs is not present. This is not just a DETI responsibility; it is an Executive responsibility.

The rural White Paper action plan places a strong emphasis on improving broadband for business, but its targets are not challenging enough. Rather than having a target to:

"extend access to high speed broadband services to 85% of rural and urban businesses",

a more challenging target would be to extend it to 85% of rural businesses. That is, if "rural" is outside the 30 mile per hour limit, rather than simply outside Belfast and Derry.

This week, Northern Ireland is on the world stage for the right reasons. Fast and efficient broadband is the train tracks on which the economy recovery engine must travel. The superhighway that links Europe with America, North and South, travels past our door. Project Kelvin is there; we just need to get on at the station.

Economic recovery will mean developing both foreign direct investment and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). While much of the foreign direct investment is based in our urban centres, our SMEs are operating across the North, from Castlerock to Kilkeel and from Portavogie to Strabane. Central to the economic recovery is a strong network of SMEs across the country, and central to that development is a fit-for-purpose broadband infrastructure. Could you do the same job in a rural SME in south Down as you could do in the science park? In many cases, you could, but look at the benefits: living and working in a rural environment; up to three hours' less travel a day, saving in monetary and environmental terms; leisure on your doorstep, such as a walk in the Mourne or mountain biking in Castlewellan; cheaper office space; lower house prices; and friendly people.

All rural dwellers should have equal access to broadband services as their urban counterparts. Our farmers need broadband, be it for online applications for single farm payment, stock monitoring, stock records, VAT or PAYE returns, to name but a few.

Our schools need a good service. That was one of the many problems we had with computer-based assessment. Our rural schools have ongoing problems with connectivity. It sounds good, in theory, if you have a 5-meg speed, but once you split it across 20 computers it is very, very slow.

Our tourism industry needs a superfast broadband service for many reasons, including marketing and booking information. Transforming Your Care also needs a good broadband service. In conclusion, Minister, I commend the work that has been done to date, but there is more to do. DETI has a lead role to play with Executive colleagues to ensure that our economic recovery train can leave the station with the right broadband infrastructure.

Mrs Overend: The rapid emergence of digital technology has changed consumers' service needs and demands. The fact that we are having this debate today is evidence of how government must be responsive to that. The motion refers to the provision of equitable broadband speed, cost and reliability. I am sure we can all agree with that aspiration, especially those of us from rural constituencies. For example, in Mid Ulster, I have been contacted by those in the business community and individual consumers who are struggling with access to broadband because of their location. That cannot be allowed to continue. I am, therefore, happy to support the motion. I hope that it will lead to a renewed focus on addressing some of the problems that still persist in various parts of Northern Ireland.

The Executive have taken steps to improve the situation. That is to be commended. DETI has been working through the next generation broadband project to ensure the development of a modern, efficient infrastructure, which is essential for economic and social development. It also has in place a telecoms action plan, which proposes that, by 2015, virtually everyone in Northern Ireland should have access to broadband of at least two megabits per second and that 90% of premises will have superfast broadband speeds of 24 megabits per second. I am sure that the Minister will detail the work of her Department much more fully in her contribution as well as outlining the budgetary commitment to rural broadband in particular.

The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has also invested £5 million from the rural development programme to tackle this issue. The Department of the Environment (DOE) has announced changes to the planning system to boost mobile phone and internet coverage in Northern Ireland. That has improved the speed of the planning process. Applications are no longer needed to replace, alter or extend an existing mast or antennae or to install a limited number of antennae on an existing mast. All of that is good work that is being done at a devolved level. It must be continued and developed.

Further to that, we have also received significant support from Westminster in this vital area. George Osborne, in his 2013 Budget, announced his intention to re-profile funding for broadband to support local delivery. In the previous 2012 Budget, £13.7 million of investment was allocated to Belfast for the delivery of ultra-fast broadband to up to 113,000 residents and 9,000 businesses and high-speed wireless connectivity to up to 63,000 residents in key areas. An additional £50 million was also made available to fund a second wave of super-connected cities, with cities across the UK eligible to apply for funding.

That 2012 Budget also set out investment in mobile infrastructure to deliver improved coverage, including on the A2 between Londonderry and Newry and the A29 between Coleraine and Armagh, which, as you know, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, is a very important route because it travels directly through Mid Ulster. Although it is, of course, split between urban and rural areas, I ask the Minister to outline in her response the current situation with that funding and the work that is under way as a result of it.

It is also topical to raise the issue of the G8 summit. It has been said that Fermanagh has received increased broadband for the purposes of hosting the summit. I am sure that residents will be pleased about the improved provision. However, it is important that there is a more permanent solution for that area of Northern Ireland.

Despite the ongoing work that I have outlined, issues remain unresolved. I mentioned my constituency at the outset. Many Members will have had similar experiences with their own constituents expressing concerns at weak broadband coverage and "not-spot" areas. In the past, the Minister has admitted that her own broadband service in County Fermanagh is sometimes intermittent. We cannot allow a situation to persist whereby some people in rural areas are being subjected to a service that is much inferior to that in other areas.

Recently, I heard concerns being raised by the First Minister about displacement of jobs should enterprise zones be set up in a specific area in Northern Ireland. The fact is that such poor broadband provision is having a similar effect in rural areas because it is leading businesses to relocate elsewhere. Earlier, my colleague from south Down mentioned farmers. They are unable to relocate. Yet, they are being encouraged more and more to complete applications online.

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

Mrs Overend: This is a serious issue. I support the motion.

Mr Lunn: First of all, I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate to hear Mr Flanagan's introductory comments. I also have to apologise because I will not be here much longer after I have spoken. These things, sometimes, happen.

3.45 pm

When you see some of the figures from Ofcom — 95% of consumers in Northern Ireland have access to superfast broadband services, which is the highest in the UK — you might wonder what the problem is. However, there is still a problem in some rural areas and in other areas where some people get a reasonably fast broadband connection, but others down the street do not. So there is still work to be done, but I acknowledge the work that has been done, particularly by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

In the information pack, I read about the project to upgrade 1,265 cabinets, which I will come back to in just a moment. That is an example of necessarily slow but steady progress. Each one of those cabinets may not benefit 20,000 people, but it will benefit a number of people, and, gradually, we will whittle away at the last 5% who are not satisfied with what they have at present.

When we have these discussions, I often use my home as a test case. We have not had broadband coverage worth the name for the past 10 years. I periodically check the anticipated speed by testing the line with BT. I tested it again this morning in preparation for this debate, and I was told that I could expect a broadband speed of 2.5 megabytes, with margin of error of 2 megabytes. So, that did not advance my cause very much. I then took the trouble to phone BT to discuss it, and I found out, to my enormous pleasure, that I can now get 10.8 megabytes using some kind of BT product, which will not cost me any more than am I paying for the use of a phone, with BT Sport also thrown in. I can announce to the House and the world outside that I have taken that deal. The reason for that increase is that the antiquated Stoneyford exchange now has a fibre optic connection to whatever cabinet serves my property. That will be good news for a lot of people in the immediate locality. That is what we have to do: increase it step by step.

I acknowledge the work done by the Minister's Department and the Agriculture Department. I encourage them to do more as quickly as possible and to work with the private sector. I know that the private sector can do things that government cannot do in case they distort the market, but I am sure that, with intelligent co-operation, we can get there and make things even better than they are now. Having said that, I will support the motion.

Mr I McCrea: Like others, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. Mid Ulster is divided up into about two-thirds rural dwellers and one-third urban dwellers. Like other Members who represent the constituency in the House, I am more than aware of the difficulties that people living in rural Mid Ulster have in achieving a decent connection. However, I have to give credit where it is due. Having led the delegation from Cookstown District Council, which included councillors, officers and, indeed, businessmen from the constituency, that met the Minister to deal with broadband issues, I can truly say that, on every occasion, the Minister had a listening ear, and I think that that is because she represents a rural constituency and, therefore, understands the problems. I certainly never came away from any meeting or discussion with the Minister feeling that she was not willing to do her best to help, and I have no doubt that that will continue to be the case as we move into the future.

My colleague referred to educational needs, and this is certainly vitally important for our young people. I, along with my colleague Alastair Ross, attended an Open University event up here, and an important aspect of its work is done via the internet. It is important that we try to ensure that our students have access to decent broadband speeds.

There are rural businesses out there that have the opportunity to win contracts to fix computers across the world, but they depend on superfast broadband speeds to be able to achieve that. That enables them to log on to a computer on the other side of the world and deal with problems, which saves them a lot of money. It is certainly something that the superfast broadband can help with.

I know that, in my council area, there has been a lot of focus on consultations that the Department has been carrying out, and people responded to the postcode issue of "not spots" or slow speeds. It is important that people take the opportunity to respond to these, because people can be missed. It is important that we can truly say that we have 100% coverage; that that is a real figure. Sometimes, you make a

comment — this has happened to me — only to receive an e-mail saying, "Well, what about me?" It is important that we do all that we can to achieve superfast broadband, but it is not something that can be realised in every area, especially in rural Northern Ireland.

One of the strangest conversations I have had with a constituent was with someone whose cabinet across the road in front of his house had recently been upgraded to fibre optic. He was straight on the phone to get his line upgraded, only to be told that his house was covered by a cabinet that had not been upgraded and that was about a mile up the road. He was very disappointed, I have to say, and no matter how much I or others tried to explain it, he could not accept that this was in any way acceptable. It is important that we do what we can.

I have no doubt that the Minister will do everything that she can in making her bid for Westminster funding to ensure that a fair share of that money is spent here in Northern Ireland so that our rural dwellers have an equal opportunity to access the type of broadband that people who live in urban areas have. I commend the Minister for the work that she has done up to now, and I look forward to working with her to ensure that rural dwellers get the adequate service that they feel that they should have.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I speak as a member of the ETI Committee. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. A lot of the points have been made, so I just want to make a number of observations.

As a Member who spoke earlier said, this is an important issue not only for rural businesses but for rural families. The motion clearly calls on the ETI Minister to work with local stakeholders to identify the areas that are in greatest need and to provide solutions or to target investment accordingly.

It has been suggested that, at present, everyone in the North has access to broadband services. We are told that a broadband service of 512 kilobits has been available since 2005, but the reality, as Members have said, is that, in many areas, consumers enjoy speeds of at least 2 megabits per second, which is about four times as fast as 512 kilobits per second. I welcome the fact that DETI is considering how to address the issue of the remaining homes and businesses, particularly in rural areas, that suffer from that lack of provision.

Much has been made of Project Kelvin and the opportunities that that gives us in relation to data connection and connectivity, particularly with North America. However, it is my contention that this has not been marketed to its full capacity. Service providers are considering upgrading to 4G. That begs the question of why there is such a focus when we have so many gaps in current service provision. It is my understanding that, under the Communications Act 2003, the Department can make investments to deal with the extent of telecommunications. As Members said, the Department will initiate a procurement process to allow telecommunications suppliers to offer solutions that will deliver on some of those challenges. That is very important.

Ofcom's infrastructure report contains fixed broadband figures broken down by council area. Before I am accused of being a north-west whinger again, it is important to reflect on the north-west, for example, when we compare Derry, as a connected city, with places such as Limavady. The figures speak for themselves when 12.7% receive less than 2 megabytes in Derry and 24.7% in Limavady. I also highlight that the infrastructure report shows that 82% of premises in Derry are covered by all mobile operators, but 3% of premises in Limavady are covered by all mobile operators. Those figures cannot be ignored and speak for themselves.

Like everybody else, I welcome the tens of millions of pounds of public money that has rightly been invested in improving rural broadband since 2007. We now need to look at all forms of technology and exploit it to find out what can best improve the situation. As was stressed, fibre-optic cabinets may help, but they will never deliver broadband to every area required.

In conclusion, I suggest that government policy needs to enhance telecommunications rather than prohibit it.

Mr G Robinson: Broadband provision in rural areas has been difficult in all constituencies. One of the most problematic areas is in my constituency. I appreciate that, although the Minister can encourage businesses that provide broadband, she cannot force them to provide the necessary infrastructure. It is also worth noting that the many billions of pounds to provide the high-speed broadband infrastructure are not currently available to the firms.

I am aware that high-speed broadband is an infrastructure item that inward investors look for when citing a business expansion. With so

much business being done online, it is seen as a must for investing in mainly rural areas. There is a former MoD base at Ballykelly in my constituency. As we seek to develop the site after DARD's proposed relocation, high-speed broadband would be one of the items on the shopping list. The range of businesses requiring high-speed service includes R&D, entertainment, call centres and design. All those areas have the potential to create high-value employment for the areas that they locate in. Therefore, high-speed broadband would be desirable where at all possible. If there is any way in which the Minister can assist the provision of high-speed broadband services, I feel confident that it will be beneficial.

In the north-west, we really are open for business. We want to provide every possible inducement to potential investors. I ask the Minister, as a priority, whether it is possible to prioritise areas for the provision of high-speed broadband connections to enable business start-up, expansion and investment to become a reality. A Member mentioned problems in Limavady, and I agree that there are problems there.

Whatever the outcome of today's debate, I hope that the Minister will explore whether any further assistance can be given for the provision of this much-sought-after business infrastructural necessity.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le moltóirí an rúin as é a thabhairt faoi bhráid an Tionóil. I thank the proposers for bringing the motion before the Assembly.

Although the motion is about harder-to-reach rural areas, it has to be acknowledged that there has been considerable investment by the Department and, to some extent, DARD to help and support the roll-out of higher-speed broadband.

Nevertheless, I think that what probably motivated the motion was that many areas, particularly but not exclusively rural areas — I will come to that in a minute — are hard to reach. Some of our towns still have significant problems, but I will stick to the motion.

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

4.00 pm

This issue is causing problems. Aside from normal consumers and family members in households, schoolchildren still have difficulty

downloading homework, and students have similar problems with their casework. Likewise, some businesses are also having problems, for example, architects and designers who need to download files when working from home. Indeed, in this ICT age, as we seek to develop the potential for software and software development, many people could do that type of work from home. However, to do that, they need the support of good broadband services.

Other businesses, such as those in the agrifood sector, need good broadband services for the transmission of data, particularly temperatures, feeding, watering and other conditions. In hen houses, for example, data feeds from a number of hen houses into one central base, and up-to-date and exact information about feeding, watering and the like is crucial to the end product of good food.

As mentioned, a major investment delivered some fibre-optic transmission, which has been of tremendous benefit and given a boost to many areas and businesses. However, there are other areas where problems remain despite that very significant and welcome investment. The UK Government, through Broadband Delivery UK, have made funding available to allow for a basic broadband service of 2 MB per second, and DARD recently made an investment in rural broadband delivery. Earlier today, the SDLP had an amendment to ensure that that would be done in a complete context, given the nature of the motion.

Obviously, there is a variety of options at the moment, be they satellite or other types of new technologies such as wireless or whatever. However, the reality is that many of those technologies do not reach people in rural areas. Mr McCrea and Mrs Overend mentioned the problems in Mid Ulster, and there have been a number of particular problems and difficulties along parts of the Tyrone lough shore and the Sperrins area of south Derry.

Scotland clearly has an ambitious plan for digital connectivity, which is aligned with a target of delivering broadband coverage at a speed of 30 megabits per second to all by 2020. That aligns with the European Commission's digital agenda for Europe, which has the same target. That significant work contextualises the huge task ahead of us, which is to roll that out and come somewhere near those targets for constituents of mine and others.

Of course, when we discuss broadband and the facilities that it provides to us, we always have to look at the technology in our hands: mobile

phones, particularly smart phones, are being increasingly used to conduct business of multiple types. I spoke earlier about software development, and the variety of apps available on smart phones never ceases to amaze me. To make sure that those apps work, we must have good connectivity.

On 21 January, the Minister told us that, at 88%, Northern Ireland was the third lowest for outdoor 2G mobile services and, at 55.9%, the second worst of England, Scotland, Wales and the North for 3G. We are now preparing for 4G, and, hopefully, most of it will be delivered by the end of next year. I have met EE, and, over the past six months, it has invested very significantly in upgrading the 3G network, and 4G remains with it —

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

Mr McGlone: Sure. However, it still has to be delivered. On that note, I support the motion.

Mr B McCrea: I am afraid that I cannot support the general goodwill towards DETI on the issue. I am rather disappointed by the progress that we have made. The top four of 200 local authorities in the UK surveyed by Ofcom for broadband black spots were Omagh, Fermanagh, Dungannon and Cookstown, and 10 of the top 20 were in Northern Ireland. There seems to be something of a problem in the way in which we are approaching the issue.

In looking at the progress of UK broadband projects, I note that Scotland managed to close its consultation on 28 November; that the Highlands and Islands — part of the Scottish allocation — finished their consultation on 14 January; and that Wales completed its consultation on 23 February. You may ask why those dates are important. The answer to that is because Northern Ireland closed its consultation on 12 October. However, the other three jurisdictions that I mentioned are in procurement. They have been through their consultation process and are actively placing service.

There are many areas in Northern Ireland without broadband, and not just the ones that I highlighted. Even in my constituency, people in the likes of Magheraconluce simply do not understand why they cannot get broadband. Therefore, there seems to be something of a problem. I wrote to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Industry about when she would be able to publish the results of her consultation. She wrote back to me on 10 December and

said that it would be published on the Department's website by the end of 2012. We are now in June and have not yet had the consultation published. I have written repeatedly to the Minister asking her what the problem is. The general position seems to be that there was a mistake of some sort in the consultation process. I invite the Minister to explain what it was.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that he said that he has repeatedly written to the Minister, will he confirm whether those letters came from his Lagan Valley constituency office, where he is having connectivity problems?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: I am not sure what that point added to the serious debate that we are having. I will carry on with my questions for written answer, which are a matter of record and the Member is free to look at.

However, on 2 January, the Minister wrote to me and said:

"I anticipate that a contract will be in place in 2013".

Given that we have not yet published the results of our consultation and are now in June, that seems to me to be a challenge. I wonder whether the Minister will confirm whether she anticipates a contract being in place in 2013.

I also had correspondence from the Minister on 26 March. She told me about the state aid rules and said that they were updated at the end of January 2013. However, I also have information that BDUK gave clearance to a range of issues, at the behest of the European Commission, in an umbrella agreement in November 2012. I cannot understand, Minister, why it is possible for Scotland, the Highlands and Islands and Wales to move forward, yet we are still not able to get our procurement issues sorted out.

Finally, I have a letter from the Minister dated 21 April, in which she states:

"It is my intention to publish a document in the near future that will ... detail ... responses received".

Perhaps the Minister will tell us what "the near future" means. Will she give us a date when

she will do that? The letter also states that she will:

"provide a final opportunity to help determine the area of intervention, in accordance with State Aid rules."

Does that mean that we have to go through the consultation process again, or are there some other issues that we want to address?

It is not an issue for just that Minister to address. From the rural point of things, it is also one for Minister O'Neill, who said in response to a question raised by the Enterprise Minister's colleague Mr Craig:

"The BDUK project deadline is 2015, but they"

— presumably BDUK —

"tell us that, as soon as they get on the ground and start working, which will be some time after next month, they will be in a position to deliver a lot quicker than that." — [Official Report, Vol 85, No 5, p29, col 2].

If there has been a mistake in the consultation process, I would rather the Minister came forward and told us what that is, that we resolve the matter together, that we try to get broadband into rural areas as quickly as possible and that we all work together for the betterment of the people of Northern Ireland.

I have —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Would the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr B McCrea: I have not brought this forward in any form of attack. I am merely asking the Minister questions, because I have written to her repeatedly but am not getting answers. The people of Northern Ireland deserve answers.

Mr Storey: I support the thrust of the motion.

I wonder whether the proposer of the motion will clarify to the House whether the mobile coverage he had when he was protesting against the G8 last night was of sufficient strength. Is that something that he has come to the House today to complain about? Maybe his expertise in this matter is gained from his former employment at Carphone Warehouse. I honestly think that he should have started with his own Minister.

It is not often that I find myself in agreement with Basil McCrea: I need to be very careful going into that territory, because people might think that I have some idea of moving parties. Let me scupper that completely: I have no intentions of that; I am quite content and am staying where I am. It was the last point he made in relation to the ARD Minister. A few weeks ago, we had an announcement from the ARD Minister that £5 million was being given to the rural community in relation to this issue. We heard in a recent statement that the ARD Minister met BT on the issue; but where is the delivery? Have farmers in the rural community of north Antrim been identified and informed that, somehow, the ARD Minister is going to help meet their needs and come to their rescue?

Telecommunications is an ever-moving technology. Northern Ireland needs to continually reassess where it is with regards to the telecommunication provision that we have.

Mr Flanagan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way. It will give me another minute.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member asked whether the ARD Minister has given £5 million to the rural community. The information I am aware of is that the £5 million set out by the ARD Minister was actually given by DETI to help the scheme that it is taking forward, not for the Minister to hand directly to rural communities. The point that Mr McCrea highlighted is the reason why the DARD £5 million has not been implemented yet. It is not because the Minister has not gone around north Antrim handing it out to individual farmers; that is not how it works.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: That is not how it is being presented by the ARD Minister in press releases. I will stand corrected, but I did not think that there was much reference — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Storey: There was little reference to DETI in the press release that came from the ARD Minister. It was as though the ARD Minister was going to be the person responsible for that provision.

We need to ensure that we continue to make progress on provision where there is an

identified need. Other colleagues have clearly identified the need in their own areas. My party colleague Mr McIlveen, from our constituency of North Antrim, has highlighted the particular issues for families and young students. He and I and our colleagues in North Antrim have had useful discussions with DETI — I commend the Minister and her officials for the way that they have responded — particularly with regard to mobile coverage in Dervock in north Antrim, where coverage is not just abysmal, it is not even present.

I also welcome the assistance of Ofcom in working to ensure that the operators provide a service and step up to the mark so that, when you come into the village of Dervock in north Antrim, you have a signal. Currently, when you reach the 30 mph speed limit sign in the village, the signal completely disappears. The lack of provision for that community is totally and utterly unacceptable.

4.15 pm

I commend my colleague Mr Rogers — he is not in the House at the moment — who sits on the Education Committee. He gave a very good overview of the issues that face rural communities, particularly farmers, students, families and schools. I have no doubt that the Minister will tell us, when she replies to the debate, the further steps that need to be taken to keep Northern Ireland moving forward so that we get to the right place in relation to telecommunications, both in broadband provision, which is good for our economy in both rural and urban situations, and in mobile coverage.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I thank the Members who brought the motion to the House. We have had many opportunities to discuss telecoms in the House, but I am more than happy to come to the Floor. I think that I indicated to the House that I would not be available today but, when I saw that Phil Flanagan had tabled a motion on telecoms, I made sure that I was here to answer it, and I am very pleased to do that.

I am happy to agree that there is a continuing need for further improvements in broadband infrastructure both in rural and urban areas. Nevertheless, I think it would be useful to remind Members that many telecommunications matters are reserved — I think Mr Flanagan made that point himself — and that my Department has only limited powers to intervene in what is a privatised and

independently regulated market. It is regulated, of course, by Ofcom. Although public funds can be used to encourage private sector investment, it is ultimately a business decision for providers to decide how or whether they wish to participate in any joint venture.

I am a little bit disappointed by the second part of the motion, which fails to recognise that we have been working regularly and extensively with stakeholders, both those who deliver services — I think that I have had more meetings with telecoms providers recently than at any time — and those who receive them. That point was made by Mr McCrea. I have met many delegations from right across Northern Ireland about difficulties with broadband or mobile signals.

The motion does not recognise that issues of need have to be balanced against technical viability and value for money. If we intervene, it will be with public money, so we need to ensure value for money. Members also need to appreciate that I cannot compel a broadband provider to invest in a particular area or indeed what charges they can apply. We can encourage and try to cajole broadband and telecoms providers to work with us, but we certainly cannot compel them to make those changes.

Despite all the constraints that I have mentioned, over the past four years we have channelled some £45 million of government money into initiatives aimed at stimulating improvements in the reach, speed and quality of broadband services across Northern Ireland. In that regard, the latest infrastructure report produced by Ofcom has pointed to the success of our next-generation broadband project in contributing to the availability of superfast broadband services right across the region. That report is worth reading and I encourage Members, particularly certain Members, to do that. At 95% of premises, we in Northern Ireland have the highest superfast broadband availability of the four UK nations.

That is not me saying that; the regulator is saying that. Colleagues need to acknowledge that.

Furthermore, Ofcom has reported that the average connection speed in Northern Ireland has more than doubled in the past year and is now the highest in the UK; that the percentage of premises with connections receiving less than two megabytes has significantly decreased, by some eight percentage points; and that the region has the lowest percentage of premises in potential broadband not-spots at

just 0.6%, which is less than half the UK average. I am not saying that, if you are in that 0.6%, it is not frustrating; of course it is frustrating, which is why we are looking at ways to intervene.

Those achievements are notable and laudable, but I have to recognise that the market is very fast-moving, that the technology is changing and that the requirements of the end user are ever increasing — a point made by Mr Lunn — with the effect that broadband access in some areas is not keeping pace with demand. That is why we are committed to looking at further ways of increasing the availability of high-speed broadband. I talk about availability: we have noticed that there has been a roll-out of superfast broadband, but the take-up in some areas has not been as high as some of the providers had anticipated. I do not know whether that has to do with price or whatever, but some of the technology that is already there has not been taken up.

My officials are progressing a project aimed at achieving universal access to standard broadband services with a minimum download speed of two megabytes and at providing superfast broadband to at least 90% of premises with speeds in excess of 24 megabytes by 2015. We proposed a potential area of intervention and engaged with the industry and the public late last year, as we heard from Mr McCrea's précis of my correspondence with him. We wanted to affirm where we should intervene.

We have heard a lot about the other regions and how they have finished their consultations, but we need to acknowledge that the reason why they have finished their consultations and are going out to tender is that they are further behind than us on broadband interventions and, therefore, there is more scope for intervention. I want to put it on record that there has absolutely been no mistake. I know that some people in the Chamber are desperate for headlines, but I am sorry to disappoint them: there has been no mistake in relation to the ongoing consultation.

Members need to be aware that the process, by its very nature, is subject to continual refinement from the market and from consumers. It is also important to note — it is sometimes missed in the House — that we need to comply with state aid rules, so that whatever we put forward complies with European regulations. I hope to publish the outcome of that engagement soon, coupled with details of our refined intervention area, which of course will be subject to consultation

so that everyone can have the chance to intervene again.

It is important that we get it right. I do not want us to intervene in an area where the providers have already intervened, meaning that there is a double intervention, which is not allowed under state aid rules. I will not be engaged in that, because I want to be engaged in interventions that will have the maximum impact across Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Foster: I will, if it is a sensible point.

Mr B McCrea: Is the Minister aware that the European Commission state aid SA 33671 UK 'National Broadband Scheme for the UK — Broadband Delivery UK' was agreed in November 2012? Are we part of that agreement for state aid, or do we have some additional hoop to go through that others do not?

Mrs Foster: It is not a matter of an additional hoop to go through; it is a matter of making sure that our intervention is state aid-compliant. Of course, the policy has been agreed. The policy context has been agreed for this area, otherwise we would not have been able to consult in the first place. We need to make sure that there are no double interventions, that we intervene in the appropriate places and that the European authorities are content. The last thing that we want to do is to have a breach of state aid. Then the whole thing would grind to a halt, and we would not get anywhere.

If the Member would like to speak to my officials — I make the offer genuinely to him — about this whole area, I am more than happy to accommodate him. That would, perhaps, be a better way of doing it than has happened heretofore. I am happy to accommodate him any time he wants to come and have those conversations with officials.

A further project is being considered to improve 3G mobile coverage and lay the platform for the widespread delivery of 4G mobile services across Northern Ireland by 2015. Because of the broadband-carrying capabilities of those technologies, there is also potential for them to be used as an alternative in areas where services delivered using the more traditional technologies continue to present a challenge. Mr McCrea referred to the fact that he had a constituent with a cabinet across the road who could not get the service. It is difficult to understand why such people are unable to

access those services, but they are connected to different wires, which come from a different box. The problem is that the wires are static in the ground and cannot be changed, whereas mobile technology can accommodate some of that demand. So, I hope that we can use some of the new mobile technology to make a difference to connectivity across Northern Ireland. The intervention area for that project will also be informed through a public consultation.

I will not have a chance to answer all the points that have been made. It is a familiar story. We all have constituents who have difficulties with broadband. I sympathise with those people of course. We are trying to make a difference through the interventions that we make. I take issue with Ms McLaughlin's point that our policy should enhance rather than prohibit: I do not prohibit the advancement of telecoms. I want to put that on the record. We are trying to make a real difference to telecoms in Northern Ireland. I look forward to going up with another Member, Mr Robinson, to Limavady on Thursday. No doubt, all the businesses there will have the opportunity to speak to me about their individual difficulties.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil le Comhaltaí as ucht a n-inchuir sa díospóireacht inniu. I will speak in favour of the motion. I welcome the contributions from Members who spoke in the debate.

I will start by responding to some things that the Minister said. She is right to say that this is a familiar story. However, each story is individual to the person telling it. I read a press statement about 18 months ago about a certain company receiving funding to address the issues around broadband in rural areas. It mentioned three or four counties in the North. So, rather than run to the Minister to find out exactly what it was about, I decided to contact the company. I set up a few meetings with my colleague Conor Murphy to try to get that company and others to make presentations in rural communities so that we could hear exactly what was going on. Three companies turned up on the night. The topic discussed was satellite and wireless technology and the money that was given to those companies to address the issues around that technology. Eighteen months later, I am still waiting for answers and people are still contacting me.

I have been engaging with the Minister. I have asked for a meeting, and she has committed to meeting me. I recognise the work that has

been done, and the Minister has outlined the work that she has done. However, in my experience, there is a lot of work to be done in Newry and Armagh. I want this matter put to bed, and I want the equality issue brought onto the agenda: these people should have the same rights and the same access to services as everybody else. Clearly, they do not. We can talk about 3G, 4G and 2G, but there are people who are still taking their children into an urban setting to print off documents, finish off exams and everything else.

I have been here for six years, and we have had this debate three or four times. I welcome the Minister coming to the debate, and I am sure that it can be frustrating. Some Members said how frustrating this issue is. It is frustrating when you have to go back, time and again, on the phone to talk to constituents who keep asking, "Where are we at?". I have three or four e-mails here, and I will go through some of the points in them. I will also try to get to some of the points that Members made.

4.30 pm

Mr Storey, who is away now, was correct when he talked about students, farmers, businesses and rural businesses. Sean Rogers was the same; he mentioned rural businesses and support. In this climate, when nearly every other motion over the past number of weeks has been about economics and trying to grow the economy, rural businesses are finding it very hard to be competitive. This provision is vital to enable those people to access a proper broadband speed. I watched the Minister carefully during the debate and listened to her respond to some of the comments from Members. This is the first time that I have had a good opportunity to speak about broadband, and I will meet the Minister after this to discuss it.

I want to give you some idea of what is happening in the constituency. I will pass on the details of some of the businesses that have contacted me to the Minister. One business has offices in Armagh, Dublin, Cork and Manchester. They get large e-mails and try to talk on the phone, because that is their only means of communication. They try to read the e-mails and discuss the issue with people in Manchester and Dublin, but the line keeps breaking up. That is not acceptable. One Member mentioned the fixed line. Nearly every house in the country has a landline. I want you to think about that. We have new terms such as "not-spots" and "POPs", which are points of presence, as the Minister is well aware. So much money was given to BT to address some

of the issues. It picked out the easy bits — the urban settings — that they could deal with. We are now left with isolated spots in the rural areas, and we cannot address them.

There are stories from people saying that they cannot access Skype and cannot do business. It is not only businesses; it is individuals as well. The Minister answered a question here — I do not know how long ago it was — about a review of the money that she had given to a certain number of companies. She was to come back here and tell me when that review was to be carried out, but I have not heard anything back. About 15 businesses and rural individuals in a five-mile radius keep coming to me about broadband access. They still cannot access it.

I welcome the £5 million intervention from the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. Unfortunately, I am speaking last in the debate, but I want you, Minister, to come back to me about that £5 million at some point. Will you ensure that the moneys that will be spent will be used to address the gaps and the lack of broadband provision in rural areas?

I want to pick up some points that Members made. Mr Flanagan talked about some issues with the tendering process, and I had hoped that the Minister would respond to that. Maybe she will come back in writing on that. I do not know where we are at now with the three companies that I was dealing with that got money to provide broadband. That still has not happened. Are there problems with the tendering? I do not know. You can look in Hansard at the point that Mr Flanagan made about the tendering process.

Mr McIlveen hit it on the head when he said that it was frustrating. It is not only frustrating; people are paying for poor broadband speed. I do not understand why that is still acceptable. Mr Rogers talked about rural businesses. I agree with him: we hear about that all the time. We can talk until we are blue in the face. I can see that the Minister is frustrated, and we obviously recognise that a lot of work is done through her office —

Mrs Foster: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: Yes.

Mrs Foster: The Member can say all that he likes about contracts, and I will look at Hansard to see what Mr Flanagan actually said. I thought that he was talking about the ongoing consultation, not the previous tenders. Those tenders have all met the conditions that were

set down for them. Will he accept that, without the intervention of those companies, whether Onwave or whoever and, in particular, BT — there has been a lot of talk here today about BT not delivering — and of the Department, we would not have the infrastructure that we have?

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her intervention. I agree about the work that has been done, and I will maybe stand corrected about the tendering process. However, I will say this about the moneys that were given out: I invited these people — you are right: you can talk all you like about how it is up to them whether they take it or not — and they were willing to come out and engage with the public. I am talking about accountability for public moneys. We gave money to address the issues, but they have not been addressed. They could have stayed away, and that would have been grand. If you feel, Minister, that you have done your bit where the review is concerned, all that I am saying to you is that those companies have not gone back to the individuals I have engaged with. So, in the future, when we are dealing with the contracts, maybe there should be more accountability.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly welcomes the investment by the Executive in improving access to high-speed broadband; recognises the continuing need for improvements in broadband infrastructure in many rural areas; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with local stakeholders to identify the areas that are in greatest need and to target investment on those areas to provide equitable broadband speed, cost and reliability.

Road Improvement Schemes

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. As two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes have been allocated to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Before we begin, the House should note that both amendments cannot be made, as they are mutually exclusive. So, if amendment No 1 is

made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. I hope that that is clear.

Mrs Overend: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the current position of the A5 western transport corridor scheme; further notes that the construction of the corridor was an Executive commitment; and calls on the Executive, given the substantial delay in the scheme, to provide immediate support to the Minister for Regional Development to progress other road schemes in place of the A5, including the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway, the A26 Glarryford to Drones Road dual carriageway, the A31 Magherafelt bypass and the A55 at the Knock Road, Belfast, to support the local construction industry.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. It goes without saying that the motion is important, so it follows that the debate is also very important.

The difficulties encountered by the A5 scheme, which I will return to, have created a huge opportunity to pick up and run with other schemes that are procurement-ready, that may begin ahead of the A5 and that would best support our local construction industry. We all know that no scheme can move beyond the procurement-ready position unless a commitment to funding is made. So, the purpose of the motion is to present the Assembly with an opportunity to say what commitments should be made.

It is worth bearing it in mind that progressing roads infrastructure projects makes a real, positive difference to the economy.

We get the short-term benefits of solid employment and the longer-term benefit of a reliable infrastructure and a significant economic driver.

I accept that my party colleague the Minister for Regional Development is not simply free to re-profile the funding of the A5 and that he requires the support of the Executive to do so. I put the challenge to the parties of those Executive Ministers: do they support the projects that we specify in our motion? If they do, can we expect the Ministers from those parties to act accordingly at Executive level?

Today is an opportunity for the House to support our local construction industry by supporting the motion and to say very clearly to the rest of the Executive that we should not sit

around waiting for the A5 to happen. When or if it happens, this is about taking the right decisions and taking them early. We would be failing that very construction industry and the people working in it — from quarrying to design to building — if we were just to say no to the credible alternative options available. Surely it is better to focus on progressing schemes more broadly than to focus narrowly on delivering a single scheme, irrespective of delay, and the consequential impact on the economy.

I say that despite having my local schemes very much in mind, primarily in Magherafelt and Cookstown. I am not shy in making clear the virtues of schemes that are local to me. The Magherafelt bypass features in the motion, along with a number of other sound schemes because they are procurement-ready. That means that, if the Executive were to give the go-ahead, we could commence work on some if not all of these schemes next year. That means that, next year, we could have workers employed on the ground, supporting jobs and the economy.

The Magherafelt bypass has been sought after for many years. Its local benefits of improved journey times, reduced congestion and the improved quality of life for people in Magherafelt are clear. Indeed, on Friday, I again met members of Magherafelt Chamber of Commerce, as did other local representatives who are here today. They clearly outlined research that has been undertaken to show that traffic congestion in the town centre would reduce by 25% and that congestion on the A31 road from Castledawson roundabout would be reduced by 35%. Without a bypass, Magherafelt is a very congested town with average daily traffic of 24,893, which is 3,000 more than the A6.

I congratulate my Ulster Unionist colleague Danny Kennedy for getting the scheme to a procurement-ready position, and I urge other Executive Ministers, in particular the Minister of Finance and Personnel, Sammy Wilson, to get behind him and the Magherafelt bypass scheme with not only an early funding commitment but an immediate one. I also take the opportunity to urge the Finance Minister to support the calls for the 10% top-up compensation for landowners, in line with Westminster.

I am less interested than others in the blame game of why the A5 became a stalled scheme. It must be difficult for Sinn Féin to stomach the fact that the scheme that it lauded found itself with a substantial delay, based on the decision taken when its man Conor Murphy was in

charge. I know that it is a sensitive spot and that sensible discussions on alternatives may make things particularly uncomfortable for Sinn Féin, but these decisions and discussions need to take place.

Some time ago, I referenced the work of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) on the importance of infrastructure for the economy. At a point in time when austerity and cuts were being held up as the only agenda, the IPPR presented a more sophisticated argument. It argued that the Government could take advantage of historically low interest rates by borrowing £30 billion for investment in infrastructure at a cost of just £150 million a year. This investment, it was argued, would act as a huge economic stimulus and provide an infrastructure legacy that would create a positive environment for business, focusing on transport and improving the movement of goods, services and people. I accepted that argument, and Boris Johnson also agreed with it. It is important that the argument is made once again here this evening.

4.45 pm

Let me turn briefly to the proposed amendments. I take no issue with the SDLP amendment as it acknowledges the need to consider alternatives seriously, and the economy is not best served by being rigidly attached to a single proposal. I understand that they are seeking to argue for additional schemes, despite the fact that they may be some way short of the procurement starting line.

In contrast, the DUP amendment will be a body blow for the local road construction industry and the many people involved in related industries. I was surprised that the DUP tabled such an amendment, and I look forward to DUP members trying to explain why they no longer believe that the projects mentioned are worthy enough to be specifically considered. Their inability to put their name to sensible road projects in a number of constituencies, mine included, is disappointing to say the least. It is disappointing that such a party political amendment has been tabled when we need to be working together to lay the foundations for future economic activity.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Overend: You will get your chance in a wee second.

When dealing with jobs and the economy, we should rise above party politics. Decisions

should be level-headed and objective. That means taking the best possible decision for our regional economy at all times. We all know that levels of economic activity continue to be disproportionately high in Northern Ireland compared with elsewhere. We all also recognise that improving our regional economy and regional economic prospects is a tremendous challenge. That means that we need objectivity and sound judgement. This motion reflects those two important principles, and, in this House, it is our job to ensure that the Executive hold to them. Of course, if that means getting the Magherafelt bypass under way next year, my constituents will certainly not complain. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Byrne: I beg to move amendment No 1:

Leave out all after the second "corridor" and insert

"remains an Executive commitment; and calls on the Executive, given the substantial delay in the scheme, to provide immediate support to the Minister for Regional Development to progress other road schemes until construction work begins on the A5, including the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway, the A26 Glarryford to Drones Road dual carriageway, the A31 Magherafelt bypass, A32 improvements between Enniskillen and Omagh, the Enniskillen ring road and other road priorities in the west and the A55 at the Knock Road, Belfast, to support the local construction industry."

In the amendment, we outline some schemes that we believe should be a priority at this stage.

The A5 saga is discussed in strong terms in my part of the world. I will not go into the whole history of why the A5 became so important after what happened to the railway in 1964. However, those of us who live in the counties of Donegal, Derry and Tyrone were greatly pleased that as a result of the St Andrews Agreement, a major flagship peace-dividend project was earmarked as a national primary route for joint Government support and action. It was a major achievement that the project was flagged up as evidence of the economic dividend of peace. To say that we were disappointed by the outcome of the recent court case is an understatement. However, I fully recognise the sense of what the Minister said about not going to an appeal. That was sensible, given that 11 of the 12 issues were successfully dealt with and only the habitats issue was outstanding.

The question now is this: what should happen to the money? Some £113 million was earmarked in the current year to be spent on the project. We do not want the Executive to lose the money to the Treasury, so we must be sensible and realistic. I state again, however, that it is crucial that the A5 project remains an Executive priority. When the outstanding issue is dealt with, I hope that work can start.

There is a road that I refer to as "the umbilical cord": the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen. It has been in poor repair for a long time, but, thankfully, Roads Service has completed two repair schemes in recent times. The Minister was at the opening of the Shannaragh section in the past year, and it is a very welcome development. Given that other outstanding sections of the road are in a very poor state — the Esker bog and Cornamuck areas — we hope that the Department will advance schemes in the coming year to address the difficulties on those sections of the A32.

We earmarked other road projects in the amendment because we believe that the money was allocated to the Department for Regional Development (DRD) and, in particular, road infrastructure. I support what Mrs Overend said about what road infrastructure projects can do for the construction industry and the local economy. We have mentioned the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway. Those of us who travel on that road realise that it is a bottleneck, and we hope that something can be advanced there. I totally agree with the need for the Magherafelt bypass. It has been in the planning for a long time and hopefully can be advanced.

Given that Fermanagh is featuring strongly on the world stage, the ring road around Enniskillen is crucial, and other sections of roadway in the area are vital for the development of Enniskillen as a tourism and economic centre.

We have also referred to the A55 road at Knock, in case I am accused of being very parochial. However, in the spirit of what is happening with the overall economic development of the region, it is important that those projects be advanced at a time when there is a crying need for construction work and development to commence.

Last week, the Minister of Finance said that over 50% of all capital construction work comes out of the public purse. If we can use the £113 million this year, hopefully a number of projects

can be started and construction employment can be increased.

I do not want to rehash all the A5 issues, but I certainly want to hear a reconfirmed commitment to that project from the Minister. I hope that the Executive collectively will not resile from the A5. I hope that the outstanding matters relating to what did or did not go wrong with officialdom can be rectified. Hopefully, the scheme can be got back on track.

There is not much more that I want to say, Mr Deputy Speaker. My colleagues Mr Dallat and Mr Mark H Durkan will speak later in the debate.

Mr Spratt: I beg to move amendment No. 2:

Leave out all after the second "scheme" and insert

"to bring forward suitable capital projects which will improve our infrastructure, provide a much needed boost for the construction sector and be delivered within the available time frame."

I want to make it clear that I am speaking not as the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development but as an MLA.

My party is not against any of the projects listed in the motion. However, we want to ensure that the funds drawn down are used in a timely manner and do not end up being returned to the Treasury. That is the most important issue in all of this. We must also ensure that there is an even spread of funding across the Province, and we want the Minister to assure us that all schemes across the Province have been looked at in the round.

As has been mentioned already, it is estimated that £113 million must be spent in this financial year. It is no secret that the Minister has already requested £61 million for DRD in the June monitoring round. It is interesting that Mrs Overend said that all the projects were procurement-ready and then went on to say that money could be spent next year. There is still some confusion over whether vesting has taken place on some of the projects, confusion over whether the full procurement processes have taken place and confusion over the situation with the public inquiries into the schemes. The Minister added some confusion earlier this afternoon, which perhaps he will clarify in his remarks, when he spoke about the situation with the A26. He said that it was at its public inquiry stage at the moment and might well be able to go "later this year" — I think that

that is the phrase that he used. Given that we have £113 million to spend, and that we need to spend it in this financial year, I would have thought that we need to have shovel-ready projects that will be able to move, and move swiftly now that we are already in this financial year. We need to get the construction industry and everybody else moving. That is certainly our perspective.

The upgrade of the A26 Glarryford to Drones Road would particularly benefit people travelling from Ballymoney, Ballycastle and other areas, as well as those visiting the north-west of the Province. Added to that is the fact that incredibly serious and fatal accidents have happened on that road, a matter that I know my colleague Mr Storey has raised regularly. All that needs to be addressed. However, I am concerned that there is an issue in relation to the public inquiry. The Minister needs to tell us whether all the vesting is in place so that spend could start immediately on those projects.

The motion refers to other projects, such as the A6, the A31 and the A55, but we have to question whether the Department is in a position to start work at those locations.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Spratt: I am happy to give way to my colleague.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the A55 Knock Road in the East Belfast constituency. That has been in the system for 40 years; that is the priority of the project. Having said that, there was a consultation process and a public inquiry, and the vast majority of the residents who attended the public inquiry and made representation to it expressed their concerns about the A55 going ahead. That was predicated on dozens of properties that had been purchased to make way for the A55 over the past 40 years.

Mr Spratt: That is a speech.

Mr Newton: I just want to come to this very important point, Mr Deputy Speaker. There was a consultation process. I wonder if the sponsors of the motion took the time to consult with local residents and RACKS, which is the community group in the area, or with the local representative for the Ulster Unionist Party on his concerns about the A55 proposal.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that interventions should be brief.

Mr Spratt: I know one thing, Mr Deputy Speaker: I will not give way to my colleague in future. He has made a speech to the House. I accept some of the points that he has made, and it is for the Minister to answer those points. It raises another issue of whether all the public inquiry stuff has been properly dealt with. The Minister, wrote a platform piece for today's 'News Letter', or somebody wrote it on his behalf. In it, he stated:

"When I took over as Minister in May 2011, it was clear that I inherited a situation where all the eggs were firmly in the A5 basket".

He went on to endorse the roads named in his party's motion to the House today. Is the Minister not now guilty of taking all the eggs out of one big basket and spreading them across a number of smaller ones? Is he not restricting the potential for the reallocation of the A5 budget? Are there not other worthy causes, not only within the roads infrastructure but in Northern Ireland Water, which will have massive benefits for the construction industry as well? Can money not be allocated there to alleviate flooding and other things, which is also a commitment of his Department, along with other Departments?

In fact, a number of questions that the Regional Development Minister needs to answer relate to improvements to road infrastructure. Is it possible to use funding for road improvements that was previously allocated to a capital project? Are other projects ready to go in respect of schemes that have not been mentioned today? If so, will the Minister identify those projects to the House? Will he identify whether there are any vesting issues in respect of the projects that have been named today that need to be fulfilled by the Department?

5.00 pm

It is vital that these questions are answered so that the funding can be used and not lost. That is the pivotal point of all this. It must be said that the responsibility for the reallocation of the A5 funds does not necessarily rest with the Regional Development Minister alone. The Executive have a responsibility in relation to that. It was clear from comments made by my colleague, the Finance Minister, last week that the Finance Department has been generous as regards the DRD budget in the past two years. He said:

"£109 million in 2012-13 and £120 million in 2011-12." — [Official Report, Vol 86, No 2, p66, col 2].

That was in relation to the roads maintenance budget. That budget is some £800 million in arrears. There is a backlog that would allow the construction industry to get to work quickly. I ask the Minister whether there are shovel-ready schemes with capital money in that budget that can go ahead to improve the roads infrastructure. Has the Department fully looked at the options for how the money can be spent, because roads maintenance is one area where the Department is very good? We know what happened over the winter period, for instance.

Probably one of the major complaints that we all hear, apart from housing and other issues, is the condition of some roads throughout the Province. The Minister has mentioned that regularly, so has everything been looked at for the reallocation of that money? According to the Minister, the A5 scheme is off the table only temporarily. Obviously, money is being spent now that has to be spent: £113 million this year. In future years, however, if it runs on, there will be other issues, so we need to look at all roads.

I have raised quite a number of points on which I hope the Minister will be able to give some answers. On that basis, I am pleased to —

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

Mr Spratt: — recommend to the House the amendment in my name and my party colleagues' names. I ask that everything be looked at in the round and that the money is spent to help the construction industry, which is the aim of all of us.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat. The A5 western transport corridor is extremely important. It will connect the north-west of Ireland to cities such as Belfast and Dublin. It is also an important internal east-west link within the Six Counties. It is not a road to nowhere, as some commentators would have us believe.

The A5 dual carriageway is essential for the economic development of the north-west. Informed predictions suggest that it could be worth around £1 billion to the economy and could provide hundreds of jobs during its construction. According to the Institution of Civil Engineers, every £1 invested in infrastructure generates an average of £2.84 for the economy, and for every £1 million invested in infrastructure, 28.5 jobs are created. The benefits are very clear.

The construction sector has taken a massive hit. We met the contractors directly affected by

the A5 decision and, more recently, the Quarry Products Association. Thousands of workers rely on strategic roads projects such as the A5, but are now forced overseas to work or to join ever-increasing dole queues. We also recently met the president of the NI Chamber of Commerce and the chief executive of Enterprise NI. Two of their six key priorities include lobbying for the green light for strategic projects and the promotion of trade overseas. Within that strategic context, the A5 western transport corridor is the biggest single infrastructure project on this island. That is acknowledged by the chambers of commerce along the route, which have been working hard on the campaign.

The A5 delay is having a wider impact on regional development across the island, as we are in the most westerly part of the EU. It is particularly affecting the N2, N14 and N15. That topic will be dealt with later in the debate by Seán Lynch, our party's regional development spokesperson and Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development.

Alternatives to the A5 have been suggested online, such as an upgrade to two-plus-one standard. According to the public inquiry report, however, there are over 1,300 accesses and entrances along the existing A5, and each is an accident waiting to happen.

An online solution, or an upgrade, would require the bypassing or the vesting of homes and businesses in settlements such as Sion Mills. Indeed, everyone has the right to use the road. That includes families who live along that road, and strategic traffic that is making its way to the major cities on the island. However, it is the interface between the strategic and local traffic that gives rise to frustrations, tailbacks and risk-taking. The construction of a completely new carriageway to separate the strategic and local traffic would reduce journey times and make travelling a great deal safer for everyone. Along with the new dual carriageway, the current A5 will be maintained as an A-class road.

Unfortunately, the A5 has taken many lives over the decades. Anyone who has browsed the comments left on the action for the A5 online petition will not have failed to be moved by the very personal stories of people who have lost loved ones on that stretch of road. It is a fact that road safety increases as the quality of the roads improves and that dual carriageways are safer than single carriageways. Indeed, according to statistics provided by the PSNI to the 'Ulster Herald', there were 97 recorded collisions on the A4 between 2005 and 2010,

with, unfortunately, nine people losing their life. Thankfully, since the A4 dual carriageway opened at the end of 2010, no one has lost their life on either the existing A4 or the A4 dual carriageway, and recorded collisions dropped dramatically to two and six respectively by the end of 2012.

On economic, social and safety grounds, there is very little alternative to the A5, and it is imperative that the single issue relating to the EU habitats directive, which is currently delaying the project, is dealt with swiftly and competently so that the project can get back on track.

With regard to the motion —

Mr Spratt: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member has mentioned the habitats directive. I notice that attempts are being made to move the blame to previous occupants of the Department for Regional Development, but is it not the same officials in the Department who should have dealt with that, no matter who the Minister was?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McAleer: Thank you. Yes, I agree with the Member; that was a very good comment. I understand that it is being dealt with. We picked that up through the Regional Development Committee; it is being overseen by an independent third party body. It is something that the Minister will probably want to pick up on as well.

I move now to the motion and the amendments. According to the latest ISNI reports, and, indeed, comments made earlier today in the Chamber by the Minister, virtually no strategic projects will be shovel-ready by the end of 2014. If the motion and amendment No 1 were to be implemented, it could increase the risk of all, or part, of the £100 million-plus reduced requirement from the A5 western transport corridor not being spent on projects in the Six Counties this year and, in fact, being declared back to the British Exchequer and lost to the local road-building industry.

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

Mr McAleer: Amendment No 2 recognises that it is for the Executive to decide which capital projects should be brought forward to improve our infrastructure and to give a well-deserved boost to our local construction industry. In that

context, Sinn Féin will be supporting amendment No 2 and voting against the motion and amendment No 1.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate. I also rise to speak in support of amendment No 2. Coming from east Antrim, I am in a reasonably good position to understand the consequences of delays and hold-ups in a major road scheme, the A2 having taken decades to get to the point that it is acknowledged, Minister, it is getting to today. Along with all my colleagues in Carrickfergus Borough Council, I continuously lobbied for over 30 years to keep that project alive. I trust that those in the west will not have as long to wait for their project to commence.

However, following various legal proceedings which are not the subject of today's debate, the A5 may not be going ahead for a period or into the future. As that project is currently in limbo, I think everyone can agree today that what we should be doing is considering how we use that money for alternative projects. That is what today's debate is about. It is very clear: there should be no question of the money being returned to the Treasury, as it was, and has been, allocated to Northern Ireland and should be spent in Northern Ireland on appropriate and beneficial schemes. As has been said, due to the differing budgetary rules, this money must be switched only to other capital projects and, given time constraints, they have to begin relatively soon. Hence, the much-hackneyed term, "shovel-ready projects", which has been used in the debate already.

The motion and the two amendments share the same sentiment. We are not that far apart on those matters. However, for simplicity's sake and maximum freedom to choose the best projects, we prefer the wording of amendment No 2. I genuinely have concerns about the inclusion of name-specific road projects. Although it is tempting to attempt to prioritise them, we would prefer that, rather than a list of projects outlined in the motion, the best-value-for-money and readiness test would be applied across a broad range of projects and Departments, as well as all of those projects.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mrs Overend: I just want to clarify a point. Compare the motion and the second amendment. First of all, our motion asks for support for the Minister for Regional Development to progress other roads schemes

in place of the A5 scheme, including the ones that we have listed. One can, therefore, add other schemes if one wants to do so. We just wanted to include those specific ones. I will have to intervene again because I cannot remember what my other point was.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you. I acknowledge the point. I will address it shortly.

We know the problems that face the construction sector and the boost that it gets from major capital projects. That is why the Assembly should not constrain itself to a pork-barrel list of road projects. Instead, we should make the money that is released from the stalled A5 scheme available to all capital projects. I acknowledge that that is in the motion.

Mrs Overend: I will come in again, if the Member will let me.

Mr Dickson: No. Thank you. I need to finish this.

It is for that reason that I genuinely believe that we should make that money available not only for road projects but for other Executive projects, such as the upgrading of healthcare trust homes, work that would benefit the construction industry, and the public transport system, to which I will return in a moment.

Despite the potential extension to the Assembly's mandate, there is still a very tight turnaround time within which to give large projects the go-ahead. We do not want to get bogged down in arguments over whether a project was included in an Assembly motion. Given public transport's place as the poor relation to roads, we should not limit ourselves just to road schemes.

Mr Byrne: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: I am nearly finished.

We should look to see what capital projects for cyclists, buses or trains await funding, all of which could prove beneficial to the construction and other indigenous industries in Northern Ireland. For those reasons we will support amendment No 2.

Mr Girvan: I speak in support of amendment No 2. In doing so, I want to refer, as my colleague did, to the article in today's 'News

Letter' which calls for immediate support for other roads projects, namely the list of four. I appreciate the intervention about the motion including other schemes. However, the point is that, as has already been indicated, the four road schemes that are mentioned could not start until 2014-15, which is the next financial year. That is referred to in the article, if it is correct. If that is the case, why do they need immediate support, because support cannot be given to those schemes.

In light of that, if that were the case, what did the Department intend to spend on those schemes in the current financial year? Perhaps, the Minister could refer to that in his response. I would like to find out what the Department intended to spend out of its budget for the current financial year if it had not believed that it would have the windfall of £113 million for a project which, because of the courts, has not got the go-ahead. We know that, perhaps, there is more to it than that.

Mr Spratt: I thank the Member for giving way. Given the fact that some of the schemes that were referred to by Mrs Overend cannot go ahead until next year, I would have thought that it would be too late to start them in January, with only three months until the end of the financial year. In fact, those schemes need to be ready to go right here and now.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

5.15 pm

Mr Girvan: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is exactly the point: we do not want to hand back money to the Exchequer next year because we were not able to make the spend.

I appreciate that it is somewhat late in the day to deal with the matter and that we have a very small window for going forward. Some Members mentioned that a lot of planning is needed for vesting and such areas. That has to be dealt with, but it takes time. Even projects that are under way took time, and I am thinking particularly of the A8 in my area. I read a newspaper report that said that Ballynure was to get a bypass in 1929, but work on that scheme only started lately, and there have been major concerns about it.

I am sure that most of us hear day and daily people's concerns about the upgrade and maintenance of existing infrastructure as opposed to the addition of new infrastructure. I

know that the Department spends a sizeable amount of money paying out on claims for damaged wheels, tyres and suspensions because of the proliferation of potholes in our main roads and, in particular, our rural roads. That needs to be looked at, as it would benefit, in a major way, the whole of Northern Ireland, not just one region.

The fact that spend on roads creates employment has been mentioned. I genuinely believe that we have to look at what is going on with some of the schemes that have been appointed. The lead contractor might be from Northern Ireland, but few people from the local community are benefiting from working on the job. So, I wonder where that money is going. Is it going to other people who are, ultimately, taking it out of the country? Something needs to be done about that.

I really do not think that some of the schemes in the proposals can be delivered within that window of time. I appreciate that some of those have been mentioned for some time. However, it is one thing to have a desire or a wish list, but it is another to have something that is ready, capable and ready to deliver. We need to make spend on the ground today so that we do not lose money next year. I support amendment No 2.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I also support amendment No 2, which will mean that the spirit of the motion is that the A5 remains an Executive priority. The difficulty I have with the SDLP amendment — I support all the projects listed — is that the A32 between Omagh and Enniskillen, which I support as well, needs to be ready to go. As for the Enniskillen ring road, or the Enniskillen bypass as it is better known, much as I want that to be implemented so that people can drive across it this year, the reality is that it is — pardon the pun — miles down the road. It is not that my party or others have not been working to push that project forward. We have a cross-party group, which includes all the constituency MLAs and the MP, that comes together under the stewardship of Fermanagh District Council, and that is one of the key strategic projects in the county. Indeed, the Minister had a meeting in his office here with Minister Foster, me and a number of other MLAs. However, the project is not shovel-ready. We can all write down a list of —

Mr Byrne: I thank Mr Lynch for giving way. Does the Member accept that the first amendment asks for the A5 to remain an Executive commitment and adds another condition by stating:

"until construction work begins on the A5"?

Surely those are the two ways best to protect the project.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree: the best way forward is that the project remains an Executive commitment. That is our position.

The fact remains that the money from the A5 needs to be spent within a short time frame, as Members across the way said. The Chair said that there was approximately £113 million that needed to be spent. The Minister said today — we should all read the Hansard report of what he said — that there are few shovel-ready schemes. We have this huge surplus of money, and the Executive need to consider other suitable capital projects, which may not necessarily mean road projects. That is the reality if those projects are not ready. The money needs to be spent in a manner, as amendment No 2 states, that:

"will improve our infrastructure, provide a much needed boost for the construction sector and be delivered within the available time frame."

As my colleague said, we have met representatives from the construction industry. The delay in building this project is frustrating for us all — there is no doubt about that — particularly for people who were waiting to go on site. We know that there were a lot of workers — I have met some of the contractors — who were waiting to go on site for six months. I welcome the Minister's commitment, given to the Committee and the House today, to the A5 project.

We understand that there will be a small delay of maybe a year to 18 months on this project. I trust that the Minister will work as speedily as possible through the necessary assessment process as indicated by the judge. Hopefully, once it has been given the go-ahead following the resolution of any outstanding issues, the Executive will move immediately to push forward with what is essentially a project of huge economic benefit.

Mr Storey: I wish to place it on record that, as far as I am concerned, in the issue before the House, a priority for me as an MLA for North Antrim is to ensure that the A26 project that has been listed is progressed. If we had bottomless

financial provision, all the other schemes either listed or in some other programme would also be provided, because we need to see continual progress being made for the benefit of our construction industry and for the benefit of our roads infrastructure.

Let us come to the reality of why we are here. In proposing the motion, the Member said that we needed to take the right decisions. The right decision has been made about the A26. The only thing is that it is taking a long road to get to its provision. It is regrettable that there seems to be an attempt on the part of the Ulster Unionist Party to make this a political issue. I am disappointed. The Member for North Antrim can shake his head, but the reality is that that is what this is about. I am disappointed that the Minister — someone who I work closely with; someone who I respect in the House — has allowed himself, both in today's 'News Letter' and in the motion, to politicise the issue of the provision of roads. That is the disappointment that I have. We all like to have our day in the sun, saying that we lobbied the Minister, we wrote to the Minister, we have asked for this road or that provision; that is what our job is about. That is our daily bread; it is why we are here. However, there comes a time when we as Members have to set aside, as best as we can, the politics of the issue and look at its merits. I am disappointed that, today, the Member who proposed the motion, on the one hand, tried to distance the UUP from previous decisions that led to the judicial announcement on the A5 and, on the other hand, the Minister being unable to take any decision on the listed projects without the hand of other Executive Ministers to progress those schemes.

I have a file that I did not bring with me today, but I brought some correspondence on the A26 in Ballymoney. The correspondence would probably stretch from the Glarryford junction to the Drones Road junction because it has been an ongoing issue for many years. Some of my colleagues in Ballymoney Borough Council have campaigned for many years. I declare an interest as a member of Ballymoney Borough Council. When I was first elected to the council, the issue was to the fore. In recent correspondence, what did the Department say? Let us look at what Máire Cairns from the Department said on the Minister's behalf:

"However, it is envisaged that the earliest this scheme could proceed would be 2015-16".

That was in May 2012.

Mr Spratt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes. I hope that you do not take as long as Robin Newton.

Mr Spratt: I will be very brief. Does that not indicate that, when it comes to the £113 million that we are talking about, the scheme is not shovel-ready, despite the spin that the Ulster Unionist Party has put on it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for that intervention, because it leads to the correspondence of 2 July 2012. It states:

"As intimated previously, the earliest timescale envisaged for proceeding with this scheme is likely to be 2015-16".

Let us move on to the correspondence of September 2012:

"As I explained in my previous correspondence, the earliest timescale envisaged for proceeding with the construction of this scheme is likely to be 2015-16".

This afternoon in the House, I hear the Minister saying in response to a Member that it was quite possible that the project could move into next year. Is the Minister seriously telling us that he is now in a position, without ambiguity or any reference to the Executive, the other decisions that have been made, the statutory rules, the process that he has to go through —

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

Mr Storey: Will the Member tell my constituents clearly and plainly whether the scheme is happening? I want clarity before I leave the House and travel home —

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

Mr Storey: — on the A26 to Ballymoney.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt in éadan an rúin, in éadan an chéad leasaithe agus i bhfabhar an dara leasaithe. I speak against the motion and the first amendment and in favour of the second amendment.

The fact is that the A5 was and remains a critical part of the infrastructure on this island. It was one of the most major projects to be

brought forward. Two of the three remaining sections of the vital connection between the first and fourth city on this island were included in the A5. The Chambers of Commerce along the infrastructure route — the western transport corridor — said that 30% of the trade from the north-west would use the A5. The A6 is equally important. It connects the second and fourth cities on this island. That also remains as an Executive commitment and is, indeed, included in the Programme for Government.

5.30 pm

I was very worried when I saw the motion because it seemed to be a reversal of policy on the A5. It specifically says "in place of the A5", and that seems to fly in the face of some of what the Minister has said to us over the past couple of years. Thankfully, the deputy First Minister has echoed the commitment to the A5 in recent times, and that has been reflected by a number of other parties across the island. There is a call for support for the Minister for Regional Development — he certainly would have my support for a number of issues if he were to bring them forward in a timely manner — but there has to be a prioritisation of schemes, as outlined in the most recent ISNI investing activity report.

I was also rather worried about amendment No 1. Essentially, it would allow a number of projects to leapfrog one another. We all have competing priorities, but there are those of us who know what the prioritisation of individual jobs should be. When the A5 was announced, the Member for Foyle, who is sitting to my left, called for the moneys to be redirected to the A6. I do not know whether the wording of amendment No 1, including:

"other road priorities in the west",

is exactly what he meant by that.

I do not have any terrible issue with the other projects outlined in the motion and the amendment because a number of them would benefit my constituents. They include the upgrade of the A26 Frosses Road, which would take many travellers from the north of the constituency. I also have no issue with the A6 at Moneynick, the Castledawson/Randalstown connection. I sit there every morning of the week for anything between 20 and 40 minutes. The Magherafelt bypass would also speed up my travel time to Croke Park on the occasions when I can get tickets.

The A6 is also a very strong commitment, and I am disappointed that the SDLP amendment does not put that forward. As people know, Dungiven has been waiting for 43 years for a bypass. As a very fresh-faced seven-year-old —

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mr Ó hOisín: No, I am nearly finished.

Mr Dallat: You know why you are not giving way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Ó hOisín: I just want to make my point. As a fresh-faced seven-year-old in 1970, I attended a Dungiven bypass exhibition. Forty years later, I took my seven-year-old to a Dungiven bypass exhibition. The point is that the number of people who travel through Dungiven has gone up to somewhere in the region of 25,000, and that has created health issues. Other Members mentioned fatalities on major roads, but, in the Dungiven area, the amount of nitrous dioxide poured into the air is 10 times the level of elsewhere.

I want a number of the projects to be taken forward. There is a risk, and I think that the Chair of the Committee for Regional Development touched on it.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: The funds should be drawn down in a timely manner, and the questions about vesting, public inquiries and procurement should be addressed by the Minister.

Mr Dallat: It seems that hypocrisy know no bounds in this debate. We had Mervyn Storey — he is now absent from the Chamber; he uses it these days only to make announcements and then clear off — speaking for the A26, which, of course, I support, and we have just had Cathal Hasson making an emotional plea on behalf of the A6. Both will go on to support an amendment that is virtually a blank cheque for the Minister or, perhaps, the Executive, if everything that we hear is true. I can understand the DUP —

Mr Ó hOisín: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is my contention that Members should be known by the name by which they want to be known: I use the name Cathal Ó hOisín.

Mr Dallat: I apologise. I was not even aware that I had done that, but you get used to something for a lifetime, and it is sometimes hard to change.

I can understand this from the Chairman of the Regional Development Committee and his friends, but I do not understand the Sinn Féin men from the west. I really do not. They are backing an amendment from the DUP. History is important, and I think that we all appreciate it. The history of the A5 is that there was an acknowledgement after the Good Friday Agreement that there was a terrible weakness in the infrastructure in the west. That is the reason for it.

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment keeps telling us, every time she comes here, that she cannot influence where inward investors go. However, we can, and it is by improving the infrastructure in the areas that lack jobs, which, of course, is the west. That is why our amendment —

Mr Spratt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dallat: Not at all. You have had more than your fair share.

That is why the SDLP amendment, accepted by the Ulster Unionists, seemed fair and logical: it recognises that that £113 million should be spent in the area for which it was hard-fought.

You see, this is not just about roads. It is not a wish list for what road goes where. It is about the concept of addressing things in the past that were wrong. For whatever reason — we will not go into the history of it — there is a serious infrastructure deficit. Included in that are roads such as the A6, a project that we fully support. I am on record as having supported the A6 week in and week out, from A to Z —

Mr McCartney: Where is that in the motion?

Mr Dallat: — the A32 and, of course, the A26. I am sure that the Member who is shouting out from a sedentary position will put his name down to speak and take his chance.

Mr McCartney: Where is the A6 in the motion?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Dallat: Sorry. I will tell you where the A6 goes. It goes to the city that you live in.

Mr McCartney: Where is it in the motion?

Mr Dallat: It is one of the few — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We will have one Member speaking through the Chair at any one time.

Mr Dallat: Mr Deputy Speaker, I was sure that I was that Member, but obviously not.

I suspect that Belfast and Derry are the only two cities in Europe — they are the only ones that I am aware of — that are not connected by a motorway or at least a decent dual carriageway. Our amendment addresses that and deals with it.

Cathal Ó hOisín referred to Dungiven, of course. I was in Dungiven and heard the speeches from the previous Minister for Regional Development, Conor Murphy, and all the promises that were made. I heard Mr Spratt, I think it was, wanting to apportion blame to officials for the faux pas and the disappointment. However, I am sure that Mr Spratt would join me in saying that the buck stops with the Minister. The previous Minister was responsible when this package was put together. Let no one get away from that.

Look, I have said it before and I say it again: the west is seriously disadvantaged, not just in roads but in jobs. While people want to talk about tarmac, I want to talk about people. I want to address the serious issues that the Assembly was set up to address. President Obama told us yesterday about the long road to go, and when I see what is going on here today, which is this convenience between the DUP —

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

Mr Dallat: — and Sinn Féin, and, of course, they are always dependent on the Alliance Party for support. I see that President Obama was absolutely right: we have a long road to go. Those men from the west need to reflect —

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

Mr Dallat: — on what they are doing.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Will the Member acknowledge that it is not only men from the west? As a female MLA from the west, I would like to be recognised as such, thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order.

Mr G Robinson: I will be brief. As a Member who represents East Londonderry, I realise that the A5 money needs to be put to constructive use by the Minister and the Executive. Rather than see the £113 million redirected to the Exchequer, I appreciate that there are many worthy causes in the form of water and sewerage projects and transport issues. Some of the schemes, as my colleagues said, are not shovel-ready, but two projects in my constituency are overdue. They are the Dungiven bypass, which poses great health and safety problems for the residents and motorists of that area, and the Gortcorbies climbing lane between Limavady and Coleraine, which needs urgent work.

The other roads priority is surely the A26, or Frosses Road, project, where so many fatalities have occurred over a long period of time. As a person who travels along that road quite often, I know that it is one of the most dangerous roads in Northern Ireland. I think that something needs to be done urgently.

I support amendment No 2.

Mr Allister: I support the motion. I think that it is balanced and realistic, because it does not just recite a wish list but very importantly says that the money that is available here and now should go to other road schemes so that it might not be wasted.

I start from the premise that if money is allocated for road schemes then, fundamentally, unless there is very good reason, it is road schemes that it should be spent upon. We arrive at the situation where the A5, a flawed scheme as demonstrated by the court ruling, is now something for which we are all paying a very considerable price.

What has struck me most about the debate is the base politics of it. The base politics lies in the DUP/Sinn Féin amendment; amendment No 2. It is quite clear that what is being played out here is a desire to siphon off roads money into projects —

Mr Flanagan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I ask you to ask Mr Allister to correct his term. It is not a DUP/Sinn Féin amendment; it is a DUP amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is a DUP amendment. Mr Allister has the floor.

Mr Allister: We will see, when the vote comes, just whose amendment it is.

It is quite clear that what is afoot here is to rob the roads Minister of any opportunity to announce any new projects, lest he get any kudos for it, and to garner them to the DUP/Sinn Féin cabal so that, for example, the First Minister and deputy First Minister might have the vanity opportunity to announce a new capital project for something or other. Hence the desire to squeeze out of the roads budget capital money to spend in other Departments where political capital can be made out of those announcements. That is the basic truth of the matter. That is what lies behind amendment No 2. It is plain to anyone listening to the debate that that is what is afoot. I think that it would be a scandal if the money were whipped away from roads.

My real concern, and I would like the Minister to comment on this, is that an outcome of this is that we could see a double whammy to good, deserving projects, such as the A26. We could see the A5 money being taken away for some other vanity project. Maybe the DUP/Sinn Féin are going to spend it on their new pet project, the Maze, or some capital project such as that. Who knows? We could see the A26 losing out, because the money is taken for some non-roads capital project. Then the A5 will be resuscitated, and by the stage at which we should have been reaching the A26, it will be trumped by the A5, and those road projects that have faithfully been taking their place in the queue, like the A26, will be trumped. That is what I mean by a double whammy. They do not get the fallout now from the loss of the A5 — it is taken from them — and they do not get it later, when the A5 is reinstated, because they are then knocked out of the programme.

I listened with amazement to Mr Storey say that his priority was the A26 — such a priority that he is going to vote today to delist it from the motion; take it out of the spending priority that the motion would give it, and reduce it to something far less important than the other pet projects that the DUP has in mind.

Mr Swann: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Swann: I know that Mr Storey is not here, but Mr Frew is missing as well. He said in a debate on the A26 that:

"At no time have we ever not supported the upgrade of that road." — [Official Report, Bound Volume 64, p298, col 1].

Does that tie in with Mr Storey's attitude here today?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: I think that Mr Storey's priorities are quite clear: it is, with the DUP, to corporately support whatever vanity capital projects would bring most glory to their Ministers. If that causes casualty to the A26, so be it.

5.45 pm

The whole A26 saga is very interesting. The Minister sent a paper to Executive colleagues. Today at Question Time he rather pointedly said that he trusted that other parties in the Executive will support the projects that he is putting forward, knowing that they are probably about to undermine him.

Other Ministers have had the opportunity to declare themselves on the projects that the Minister has identified. I would like to hear from the Minister, and from others, if they know the answer, whether the rumour is true that the Health Minister decreed in a response that the A26 and none of the other projects are of strategic importance. If that is right, that is a scandalous thing to say. We are talking about a road where more people die every year than on most roads. We are talking about a road that is crying out for improvement. Is it the case that a DUP Minister has dared to say that the A26 is not a strategic project and has no strategic importance? Is that what we are seeing playing out in amendment No 2?

Mr Girvan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Girvan: Was it not clear that the A26 is programmed to be done in 2015-16? Why can it not be done until then? Are there reasons behind the delay until that point?

Mr Allister: As the Minister said during Question Time, it could now be done in the latter part of next year — 2014-15 — but the point I made earlier is that —

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

Mr Allister: — if, by 2015-16, the A5 is back on track —

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

Mr Allister: — it will be taking all the roads money, and the A26 will suffer yet again.

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

Mr Agnew: The plain fact is that the A5 has been a disastrous project from start to finish. It was a politically driven project, and when the Republic of Ireland pulled out of the programme, I think that was the time for the Assembly to reflect and to change course. Some £58 million has been wasted on the project to date, and, although the Minister pointed out to me how much of that was spent under a previous Minister, it has been an Executive project, and each of the parties on the Executive must take responsibility for their part in pushing it forward.

There were a huge number of objections to the project. I commend the Alternative A5 Alliance campaign to get the road stopped. Over the weekend, some have questioned what role people power and protest have to play. This is a clear example of people taking on the Executive to say that they do not want something. They have done so legally and have challenged it through the courts. It is another example to the Executive and the Assembly of the fact that you cannot simply ignore environmental regulation. It may come from the EU, and some in the House may not like it, but you cannot simply bulldoze through environmental regulation just because you do not like it. It has to be complied with, and that is something that the Executive and Assembly need to learn.

We now have an opportunity to reflect, change course and reallocate £113 million. The lack of imagination in the House is astounding, because all we can think of is what other road projects we can invest the money in. That really concerns me, especially when I look at the balance of spending between roads and public transport. We see year-on-year increases in the millions of pounds that we spend on roads, yet, since 2006, we have seen a real-terms decrease in how much we spend on public transport. Is that because our public transport system is so great? Is it because it is one of the finest in Europe? I do not think so. I think it is because we undervalue it and underinvest in it. We have the opportunity to change that.

Some may question whether there are shovel-ready projects in public transport. There are other capital projects that have been alluded to that may be ready. I certainly know of a school, St Columbanus' College in my constituency,

that was ready to go ahead with a newbuild until capital funding was cut. There may be projects like that in which we can invest in the short term, with a guarantee that the money comes back to the Minister's Department to be spent on public transport in future rounds.

I have lost count of how many motions I have spoken on and how many questions there have been on fuel poverty. Everybody talks about it and likes to tell stories of their constituency where they know someone who is living in fuel poverty. But what have the Assembly and the Executive done about fuel poverty? They continue to allow energy-inefficient homes to be built and they continue to subsidise the fossil fuel industry and prioritise private car transport over public transport.

We need to change course and we need to change that imbalance in spending. I will leave this Chamber today and drive back to my home in Bangor, simply because this Executive and this Assembly have, over the years, failed to provide a public transport system that would allow me to travel to and from work —

Mr Dallat: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Certainly I will give way.

Mr Dallat: I just picked up on the fact that the Member is driving back to Bangor. Does he agree that we have a world-class railway operating between Belfast and Bangor which is the envy of west Belfast and, indeed, the rest of the country?

Mr Deputy Speaker: We are almost out of time for this debate, so there is no additional time on this occasion.

Mr Agnew: OK. Very briefly, to Mr Dallat, I use that railway regularly and it is an excellent service. It does not have a stop in Bangor, and I certainly do not have a public transport option to get to it. That is my point: I am 10 miles away from my home and I do not have a public transport option. I am between one large town and another. That should not be beyond the Executive and the Assembly, and until we address the imbalance in our spending on public transport it is a problem that will continue.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Mr Deputy Speaker, I would be grateful if you could indicate just how long I am allowed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Fifteen minutes.

Mr Kennedy: It was quite a lengthy debate, and an interesting one, which I obviously welcome. I particularly want to put on record what the current situation is, what the background has been and what my hope is, as roads Minister, for the future.

It would be helpful to confirm the current position of the A5 dual carriageway scheme. Since Mr Justice Stephens's ruling in May, it has been the subject of much comment, and also much misinformation. The proposal to upgrade the A5 to a dual carriageway was originally a joint commitment, which was to be carried forward as a result of the St Andrews Agreement by the British and Irish Governments. Following the Irish Government's public position of deferral of the majority of their funding commitment, the Executive announced a £330 million funding package to bring forward elements of the A5 carriageway project between Londonderry and Strabane, and Ballygawley and Omagh.

As an Executive commitment, it will require Executive approval to restructure the funding of the project and to deploy resources to other procurement-ready schemes. Schemes are unable to move beyond the procurement-ready position until a commitment to fund a scheme has been made. That is a crucial point which I hope Members will take time to appreciate.

Mr Justice Stephens's ruling quashed all the statutory orders for the proposed A5 dual carriageway, effectively bringing the process back to where a public inquiry has been carried out and the inspector's report has been received. It has been well documented that the judge dismissed 11 of the 12 grounds of challenge, but held that there was a need to carry out an appropriate assessment under the habitats directive. It is also well documented that the decision at the beginning of 2011 to dispense with the appropriate assessment and proceed on the basis of a screening exercise took place under my predecessor's tenure. Those are the facts.

In reaching his judgement, the judge gave greater prominence to the evidence of the Loughs Agency, as provided to the public inquiry, as opposed to the expressed support of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency for the screening advice that was provided by DRD's appointed environmental consultants. I have asked for a report to be prepared to address, among other things, the impacts on the special areas of conservation and proposed mitigation. That report will be consulted on publicly, and the findings of the exercise will allow me to undertake an appropriate

assessment. The appropriate assessment process has commenced, and I expect to receive the report within the next two months.

I have also asked for a third-party review of the project consultant's work in respect of the entire appropriate assessment process. That review will include the scope of the report to inform the appropriate assessment, as well as an overview of the environmental statement. Public consultation on the report, to inform the appropriate assessment process, is expected to commence in late summer 2013. Providing that hurdle is navigated, and if issues subsequently emerge from either the public consultation and/or the review that require a public inquiry, my completion of an appropriate assessment will take in the region of a further 12 months. Additional time would be required to arrange and hold a public inquiry and await and consider the inspector's report. All of that could take us to the end of the financial year 2014-15, when issues such as nesting birds and associated environmental issues may further delay a scheme. Clearly, if a further legal challenge were to emerge at any point, that too would impact on timescales.

I paint this scenario chronologically to assist in quantifying the delay. Of course, I bear in mind that I do not, and should not, at any stage prejudge the outcome of the appropriate assessment. The judge's ruling was very clear on that point. As a result of the court ruling, the ownership of the land was returned to the original landowners from 15 April 2013. Departmental officials wrote to landowners on 23 April, updating them on that situation.

Naturally, the Department recognises that some works already completed need to be reversed and has instructed its contractors to carry out such works at the request of landowners. Landowners are free to arrange for works to be carried out privately. In such circumstances, appropriate payments will be made, provided all works are agreed in advance with the Department. Many landowners have opted to carry out some or all of the reinstatement works themselves. Compensation for those works will be paid based on DARD rates. Copies of those rates have been sent to the relevant landowners and their agents.

Meetings have been held with the vast majority of affected landowners, and the scope of works has been agreed. Works to be completed by the Department's contractor have already started on site and will be completed within the next few months.

Officials wrote further to those landowners who have already received 90% compensation payments on 7 May 2013, giving them the option to either sell property by agreement or return the money and revert to the position prior to the land being vested. On the issue of the 10% top-up — and I met the Ulster Farmers' Union on that issue — I wish to make it clear that I support the GB system being extended to Northern Ireland. I have pursued that issue with Executive colleagues, and I will continue to do so.

Following the recent ruling on this scheme, I wrote to the Finance Minister on 9 May 2013 to declare a reduced budget requirement for 2013-14. It is essential that we redeploy that reduced requirement quickly to provide support to the construction sector and the local economy at this most difficult time.

I consider, as roads Minister, expenditure on roads to be a specific example of an activity that improves vital infrastructure and facilitates economic growth and, at the same time, provides much-needed local employment.

Looking forward, there may well be, given possible chronologies, knock-on implications for 2014-15. Therefore, a number of weeks ago, I provided an options paper to the Finance Minister and Executive Ministers for other major road schemes that could commence ahead of the A5 in that year. I await Executive consideration of the issue. Meanwhile, my officials are further exploring and making ready those options, given the potential timelines and risks associated with progressing the A5.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Mitchel McLaughlin] in the Chair)

Those projects include the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson dual carriageway, the A31 Magherafelt bypass, the A26 Drones Road dual carriageway and the A55 Knock Road widening in Belfast. As Members have said, the A6 is an important east-west link and is essential to improving travel between Northern Ireland's two primary cities. The 14 km stretch between Randalstown and Castledawson presents a significant bottleneck, particularly during peak times. The proposed dual carriageway would reduce journey times and would be fundamental to business and trade, particularly for the west of the Province, by providing increased accessibility to the International Airport and to the gateways located along the eastern seaboard corridor.

The proposed dual carriageway on the A26 between Glarryford and Drones Road was

examined by public inquiry last year. I want Members to listen up: subject to the outcome of the public inquiry, it could be possible to commence construction in mid- to late-2014.

6.00 pm

The A26 is an important link road to north Antrim and the north coast tourist resorts. The project is also fundamental to business and trade in that area and provides increased accessibility to the International Airport and to the gateways located along the eastern seaboard corridor. The A26 has been the subject of much comment today, but it is worth restating that, generally, vesting will not take place until the budget for a particular scheme is in place. As budgets are not yet in place for the four schemes, the vesting orders have not been made. The direction order has been made, and the environmental statement has been published for the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson, the Magherafelt bypass and for Knock Road. I anticipate being in a position to issue a departmental statement on the A26 this autumn following consideration of the inspector's report from the public inquiry. If everything were to proceed positively — read my lips — construction could commence, as I said, in autumn 2014. However, it is important not to prejudge the inspector's report, which is with the Department for consideration.

It has been mentioned today that the proposed Magherafelt bypass has been waiting over 40 years. Everything is waiting 40 years. I have been in position for two years. The bypass extends from the A31 Moneymore Road at its junction from Coolshinney Road in the south to the A6 Castledawson roundabout in the north. By providing a direct link to the A6 north-western key transport corridor, the mid-Ulster region will benefit from increased accessibility to the International Airport and to the global gateways along the eastern seaboard corridor. That is fundamental to their business and trade. I was interested in Mr Newton's support — I think — for the Knock Road project, because it, again, is 40 years old. I, too, am well aware of the concerns of local residents, who have important views to be taken into consideration. That is why the road-building exercise can be long and sometimes torturous. The Knock Road carries 45,000 vehicles a day, and the proposed improvement would upgrade Belfast's outer ring and fill in the missing link in the only section of that route without two full lanes in each direction.

The SDLP amendment mentions the A32 between Enniskillen and Omagh, and other schemes, but those schemes are at a much

earlier stage than the four I highlighted previously, and I am not in a position to bring those to construction either this year or next year.

I will quickly run through some of the contributions from Members. It has been an interesting debate, and I am glad that it has taken place. I hope that Members will look at my comments on the record because, as roads Minister, it is my role and responsibility — I make no apology for it — to bring forward road schemes that will improve the overall infrastructure of Northern Ireland. That is a fundamental requirement of my role as Minister for Regional Development, and I will not shirk from that responsibility. I want to make that absolutely clear.

My difficulty with the second amendment is that, while it highlights the merits of a much needed boost to the construction sector, it does not say the "road construction sector". I have a slight nervousness about that. As roads Minister, I want to put forward road schemes that will improve the overall infrastructure because, in turn, that will improve the economy.

Sandra Overend referred to the positive effect of roads schemes on the economy and mentioned the Magherafelt bypass. I would have been surprised and disappointed if she had not. Joe Byrne listed nearly every road in the country and wanted it all done, and that is fine, too.

However, I at least welcome support in the overall context of the matter.

I think that Mr Spratt —

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Kennedy: I have to make progress, unfortunately.

If I move to Mr Spratt's contribution, I should say that I think that nobody wants to give money back. As a member of the Executive, I do not want to give money back to the Treasury in London. That is because, in my view, that money has been earmarked for road schemes, so I believe passionately that it should be spent on road schemes. The difficulty in the past has been that all the eggs were in one basket. However, in its own way, the motion seeks to redistribute the eggs into different baskets so that the schemes can be brought forward for the positive benefit of everyone across Northern Ireland.

The question was asked about my priorities. My priorities are clear. They are to progress strategically important projects at the earliest opportunity. I am saying clearly that I am not wedded to any single project. As roads Minister, I cannot be. My commitment is to take the right decisions for the economy and for the infrastructure, and I ask other Executive Ministers, as well as other Members of the House, to support me in so doing. I am not playing games, and I am not interested in playing games. I commend all these projects to the Assembly.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ian McCrea to make a winding-up speech on amendment No 2.

Mr I McCrea: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. First of all, I thank those Members who spoke in support of our amendment, as well as others who contributed to the debate. I want to put on record my appreciation to the Minister for coming along and for outlining his position. Mind you, Minister, we read it in the paper this morning before you came, but it is nonetheless helpful that you came along to hear the issues that Members raised.

Given that those who were in the Chamber heard what everyone said, I do not intend to regurgitate what other Members said. However, I want to follow on from what my colleague Mervyn Storey said by discussing projects that are in my constituency. Although the Minister said that that money was allocated for roads projects, I believe that it is important to say that it was allocated for a road project. I want to see the money spent on roads as best possible, but like every other Member, I have a wish list for my own constituency, whether for roads or schools or any other building. So, I think that it is important that we focus on projects that can be completed in the time in which this money is available.

The Minister will know that, like his party colleague and my constituency colleague Sandra Overend, I have never missed an opportunity to highlight the need for a Magherafelt bypass. He referred to the project being over 40 years old. I can recall 37 of those years but not the additional ones. Nonetheless, a scheme for a much-needed bypass has been on the agenda for as long as I have had birthdays.

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: Quickly.

Mrs Overend: Would the Member not therefore be minded to support the Ulster Unionist motion, which specifically calls on the Minister to support the Magherafelt bypass?

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

Mr I McCrea: Thank you. The Member will know, as I already stated, that I will support amendment No 2, which is in my name and in those of some of my colleagues. I think that in response to the debate, the Minister said that he could not specifically detail which projects he could go forward with. So, I do not believe that it is best for us to restrict the Minister about which projects should happen and which should not. As I said, I think that there are other roads projects to consider, and I have no doubt that the Minister will have others that people will bring to him. So, I do not think that it is a positive thing to restrict the Minister's hands if this money is to be spent specifically on roads projects.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr I McCrea: Quickly.

Mr Dickson: I will follow on from the Member's point. Does he share my disappointment at the Minister twice stating very firmly that he is the roads Minister? Surely he is a lot more than the roads Minister. He is the Minister for public transport, and he is the water Minister. He is the Minister for Regional Development. Therefore, the budget needs to spread and shared.

Mr I McCrea: I am sure that the Minister, like everyone else in the House, knows that he is the Minister for Regional Development and has all those portfolios to look after. I wish him well in doing all that.

I commend the members of Magherafelt District Council, including the Minister's colleague George Shiels, who has been very vociferous in promoting the Magherafelt bypass with the Minister. Indeed, I commend my colleague Councillor Paul McLean, who was the chairman of the council. I have taken every opportunity that I can to lobby the Finance Minister and, indeed, the First Minister on that project. The Minister knows that I have done the same with him.

So, I do not apologise for supporting the Magherafelt bypass, but it is important that, as we move forward, we move the projects away from being procurement-ready to being shovel-

ready. I do not like the phrase, but it is important that, instead of putting a list before the House today, we are honest with people about the projects that are ready to go and the money that will be available to spend on these projects to ensure that, for the people of Magherafelt, the bypass is delivered. I ask the Minister to ensure that, in the case of the Magherafelt bypass, whatever needs to be done is done as soon as possible to ensure that, if this happens to be one of the projects to go forward, it can be delivered as quickly as possible.

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The A5 project is possibly the most important infrastructure project in the North and remains a major priority for the SDLP. However, as this money is now in real danger of going back to the Treasury, we believe that it should be spent on the named roads to ensure that there is a direct benefit to the roads construction industry and to the west in particular. Over the years, the north-west has continually been ignored for infrastructure and investment. The A5 project is more than just a road. It is a vital driver that will be used to address the economic and social deprivation facing the western area. It will create links with the Republic that will open up opportunities and revitalise a long-neglected area. It is not, as Mr Agnew believes, politically driven.

Some Members expressed concern that the named schemes are not ready, and we want to test whether procurement earmarking can be advanced any more quickly than DRD is saying. A similar line was taken by DRD under its previous Minister, Conor Murphy, on the planned delay on the Derry-Coleraine railway line. However, although that decision emerged under, and was enunciated by, his predecessor, the current Minister and his Department were subsequently able to find and accept that some of us were right in suggesting that some of the planned work could be re-profiled and expedited.

Although we can see that money in this cycle will not now be used for the A5, we must still be vigilant and determined to guarantee the earmarking of moneys brought forward for the A5 scheme once all the procedural and technical details are worked through. To this effect, I welcome the deputy First Minister's comments last month that the Executive are committed to advancing the A5, although I now have to question the value of those words, given the subsequent commitment that he gave to a cross-sectoral and cross-party deputation from the west that this money will now remain in

the west. Indeed, he intimated that it would be for the A6 in particular.

We welcome the assurance from the Minister that he is committed to keeping the money in roads, and today we ask that he remains committed to putting that money towards roads in the west. We want the money to be used for the same aims but on different roads, now that it has transpired that spending on the A5 in this round is not possible.

6.15 pm

Under the previous Regional Development Minister, the Derry-Belfast road improvement was de-prioritised. We name that road in our amendment, so that should assuage Mr Ó hOisín's concerns. Not only will the improvement of the A6 improve the quality of life for the thousands who commute to Belfast, it will make Derry more attractive to investors and more accessible to tourists.

To those content to describe us from the north-west as "whingers", I say this: give us less to whinge about. To paraphrase Woody Allen, just because we are paranoid does not mean that people are not out to get us.

That is the whinge over; now for the wind. Sandra Overend moved the motion and spoke of the difficulties encountered by the A5 scheme. She said that this cloud creates a silver lining, and it is important that we grab that and use it wisely.

Joe Byrne spoke of the road projects identified and highlighted the need to progress each one in order to benefit not just their respective area but the region as a whole.

Mr Spratt worried that the Minister was putting all his eggs in different, smaller baskets, but I contend that you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs, and the road construction industry is starving.

Mr McAleer spoke of the contribution of road improvements to increased road safety, but he proceeded to oppose a motion that calls for roads to be improved, which is bizarre. His party colleague Seán Lynch opposed our amendment because it de-prioritised the A5, yet, following an intervention from my colleague, accepted that it protected the A5 as a priority.

Mr Storey lamented the politicisation of road provision and then launched a political broadside against the Minister.

We believe that the DUP amendment, and Sinn Féin's support for it, conjure up the image of carrion crows picking over the bones of the A5 scheme to see what they can scavenge for their respective Departments.

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

Mr Durkan: One really has to wonder what their positions would be, or how they would differ, if either party had the DRD portfolio.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his earlier response.

On 14 June 2011, two years and four days ago, I made my maiden speech in the House, believe it or not. The motion was tabled by Mr Mervyn Storey, and its subject was the upgrade of the A26 and how it was a priority that needed to be brought forward. How things have twisted and changed since then. There have been rather unexpected contributions in today's debate, and they will be noted in constituencies such as mine, where we have been working really hard to raise the profile of the A26 project and have it developed to the stage of being procurement-ready. My party colleague the Minister has the great A26 scheme at that procurement-ready point where work could commence next year. He did say that, Mr Storey. You asked for clarification, and the Minister gave the date of autumn 2014 as clarification.

As Mr Dallat pointed out, Mr Storey supported the A26 scheme in his contribution; Mr McCrea supported the A6 in his; and Mr Ó hOisín supported him. Gentlemen, just throw off the shackles of your party for once and support the motion. Look at the amendment tabled in the name of the DUP, which we have heard will be supported by Sinn Féin and the Alliance — the triumvirate that we are used to seeing in this place when one of them gets into difficulty. That is also the case when a Minister gets into difficulty. If the Minister belongs to any other party, they say that he should resign, but, as Mr Spratt pointed out earlier, it is the officials who are to blame if a Sinn Féin or DUP Minister is at fault.

The A26, as Mr Allister pointed out —

Mr Girvan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Swann: No. I am making progress. *[Interruption.]* The A26 is high on the list of the most dangerous roads — *[Interruption.]* Sorry,

but there is no point in shouting from a seated position, Mr Storey. You left the —

Mr Storey: Will you take an intervention?

Mr Swann: No. I will not. I will not take an intervention from someone who left the Chamber during the debate. If anyone else does that during any other debate, you lambaste them and name them in the Chamber, so I will not give way. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Storey: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. May I just clarify that I left the Chamber to give a pre-arranged interview to UTV, so I was not running away from Mr Allister, Mr Dallat or anyone else.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member may resume.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. In his contribution, Mr Storey mentioned his time in the sun. I think that he has had another opportunity to top up his tan.

A number of other factors come into play when a region is trying to attract foreign direct investment along with taxation powers and prospective employee skills, and infrastructure is one.

Mr Spratt: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Is it not wrong for a Member to make scurrilous remarks about another Member in the House that are totally out of context and totally out of order? Will you examine the remarks that Mr Swann has just made and refer them to the Speaker?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We will, of course, study Hansard. It is wrong for Members to make scurrilous remarks. I remind the House about the Speaker's rules, which have been laid down very clearly, about good temper and moderation in the presentation of arguments. Mr Swann may resume.

Mr Swann: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am happy to take direction from the Speaker. As you know, I have done so in the past.

There is little point in us lowering corporation tax in our region if our young people do not have the right skills for the employers that we seek to attract. In the same way, lowering tax or development skills will not go the distance in attracting investment if we do not have a competitive and sound transport infrastructure

in place. It goes without saying that people in North Antrim and, indeed, East Londonderry expect their local representatives to back absolutely the schemes that matter most to their constituency, namely the A26: no ifs, no buts and no maybes. Not only do they expect but they are entitled to that full, unequivocal support, and that will be evident later today. People know that the A26 could be easily slotted in ahead of the A5 scheme, given its current predicament, only that was of Sinn Féin's own making under its man, Conor Murphy. Many other schemes could also be slotted in ahead of the A5, and we have heard a number of them talked about today. Every Member had the chance. Mr Dickson referred to the pork-belly list that we brought forward, but every Member who spoke in the House added his or her own scheme to that pork-belly list.

Importantly, the schemes that were listed are all procurement-ready and on the starting blocks waiting for the green light for funding. The issue here for debate is all about funding: future funding and making the best use of existing funds. Nevertheless, the Finance Minister, to whom the motion was tabled, passed it to DRD, and the DUP accused us of playing party politics to avoid backing the motion, a motion that is of sound common sense. That is why the DUP tabled its amendment, an amendment that is vague and non-specific.

From an Ulster Unionist point of view, there is no place for party politics when it comes to jobs and the economy. For us, it always has been and always will be about doing the right thing and doing what is right for Northern Ireland. It is simple: at this time, we need to do all that we can to support the road construction industry. Among our other knowledgeable bodies, the Confederation of British Industry backs our judgement on this one. As my party colleague Sandra Overend pointed out, so does Boris Johnson, and he gets the odd thing right too, and it is not just his sound judgement when it comes to sourcing great buses from Wrightbus in Ballymena.

We believe in taking a long-term approach, an approach that will make the best decisions now and for our future generations, handing on to them a positive infrastructure legacy. It is right to say that the decisions made today will impact on business competitiveness and the standard of living of our young people for many years to come — the sort of talented people that we saw yesterday enthused by President Obama. On the subject of American presidents, let me offer you a reminder of one of Bill Clinton's more memorable sound bites during the 1992

presidential election, when he said, "It's the economy, stupid." Let me rework that for today's debate: let us not be stupid about the economy.

In conclusion, let us make it clear that we expect the Executive to make the right decision on the capital available from the A5 both this year and next. Let us make it clear that it should be a decision that best supports our hard-pressed construction industry. It is true to say that if government spends the money wisely and thinks of the big picture, the benefits can be enjoyed by many for years to come.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I remind Members that if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2, as that amendment will have been overtaken by the decision on amendment No 1.

Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 25; Noes 57.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Eastwood and Mr Rogers

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Miss M McIlveen, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Anderson and Mr G Robinson

the construction sector and be delivered within the available time frame.

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will Members who are not staying for the Adjournment debate depart quietly and in good order?

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 57; Noes 25.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Craig, Mr Dickson, Mr Douglas, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Miss M McIlveen, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Anderson and Mr G Robinson

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Byrne, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dallat, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Swann.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Overend and Mr Swann

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the current position of the A5 western transport corridor scheme; further notes that the construction of the corridor was an Executive commitment; and calls on the Executive, given the substantial delay in the scheme, to bring forward suitable capital projects which will improve our infrastructure, provide a much needed boost for

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Schools: Dickson Plan, Craigavon

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the Adjournment topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have approximately 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have approximately five minutes.

Mr Moutray: I appreciate the debate being taken this evening. This issue is close to my heart and has exercised me greatly. In the Craigavon and Tandragee area, party colleagues and I have been experiencing an unprecedented lobby to retain the Dickson plan form of education. I speak today safe in the knowledge that it is the will of the overwhelming majority of my electorate.

Some Members may be less familiar with this unique education system. The Dickson plan system is a form of education that is unique to Craigavon and Tandragee and has served both areas well for decades. The aim of the debate today is to raise awareness of the imminent threat to Dickson and to ultimately ensure that it is preserved for many years to come.

The Dickson plan is a two-tier system in which the majority of pupils in the Craigavon Borough Council area and parts of the Armagh city council area attend junior high schools for three years before transferring to Lurgan or Portadown senior high schools or Lurgan or Portadown colleges to complete their compulsory education at Key Stage 4. It allows for an academic selection process at age 14, as opposed to 11, with pupils taking internal exams that are set by individual grammar schools and entering a grammar or senior high school at age 14.

Many people in the area have availed themselves of and benefited significantly from being part of the two-tier system, and they are now making exceptional contributions and differences to society. I went through the system in the second year of its existence, and, in more recent years, my three children have benefited from the Dickson plan. Dickson has served the area well. Analysis shows that it has provided higher than average examination results year on year, which substantiates our

argument about the tangible benefits that such a system has provided for the many thousands who have participated in it.

All is not well, however. Unfortunately, it would appear that there is a concerted effort on the board's part to decimate the system that has consistently served the community well. In recent days, we have witnessed efforts by the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB) to, for the want of a better word, cobble together a fudged consultation that has no sound evidence and is in fact blatantly outlining its preferred option. We are all long enough in the tooth to know that there is no way an options appraisal or consultation should be loaded towards one option, especially if the two options included have been deemed viable by the board. However, I will elaborate on this later in the debate.

The benefits of Dickson are clear. Academic selection is delayed from taking place at age 11 and instead takes place at the age of 14. At the age of 11, children transfer to one of the local junior high schools, and then, at the age of 14, they move to one of the two local controlled grammar schools — the highly successful Lurgan College or Portadown College — or to attend Craigavon Senior High School, which is outstanding in its educational achievements, particularly its focus on vocational courses. It provides a unique educational experience that seeks to ensure that children's individual educational requirements are met, whether they be academically or vocationally challenged. The Dickson plan also strives to ensure that children's full potential in education can be met, so that they can not only flourish as pupils but go out into further and higher education and the world of work and make a significant contribution. That has even been realised by the chief executive of the SELB, who would appear to agree with me on the success of the two-tier system. Recently, he wrote in a letter addressed to parents:

"Your options are unique because the school your child attends at present is part of the Craigavon Two Tier System. This system is highly effective with all schools producing good examination results and each school providing pupil-centred pastoral care and promoting home-school relationships to support pupils."

The local community in Craigavon wishes that highly successful system to be retained. That was proven on no fewer than two occasions recently. In the first instance, an initial public consultation on post-primary provision in the Craigavon area carried out by the Southern

Education and Library Board (SELB) revealed that some 83% were in favour of retaining the system as is and addressing the estate issue that has plagued the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School for many years. Eight per cent of respondents to the SELB consultation supported the eventual creation of a comprehensive system in the post-primary sector through the introduction of a collegiate structure. Eight per cent versus 83% speaks volumes.

The SELB, however, has recently displayed an attitude of utter contempt and disregard for the opinions expressed by local people. It has chosen to ignore the overwhelming majority and has recently formulated a further consultation that endeavours to force a bilateral system on the people of Craigavon and Tandragee. In doing so, it has released to the post-primary schools in the area a further consultation that details two options for the future of post-primary education. Only one of those options — option B — will ensure the continuation of the highly successful system that we have. The other option — option A — seeks to force a system of comprehensive education on a community that does not want it. Option B is the only option that will retain distinctive grammar school provision, providing equality and parity with other areas. It will also address the estate issue that the senior high school campus in Lurgan has been subjected to.

Option A would mean a loss to the area of the Lurgan and Portadown colleges, which would undoubtedly lead to the migration of many families out of the Craigavon area to avail themselves of educational establishments in other areas that have grammar school status. A migration of children and young people would have a devastating effect on our local economy and would be disastrous for business and trading in the borough of Craigavon. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that people will relocate from the Craigavon area, stripping the highly populated area of Craigavon of young and vibrant families who are best placed to contribute to the economic recovery of the area if they are nurtured and educated and later return to work in the area. Local services would, no doubt, be affected by such a loss.

Option B is the only option that will retain Craigavon Senior High School. Indeed, it proposes the creation of a single 14- to 19-year-old campus of Craigavon Senior High School. That would ensure increased accommodation and curricular provision, and it would enable the school to build on its already long-established high-quality education provision that is focused on vocational subjects.

The creation of a 14- to 19-year-old campus would also grant further financial viability, as the management of a single campus for four instead of two year groups, as outlined in option B, would guarantee the long-term sustainability and viability of Craigavon Senior High School.

Although option A claims to retain the Dickson plan system, the community has not been fooled. Indeed, I believe that the SELB has blatantly misled in the consultation, owing to the fact that option A would lead to a single all-ability comprehensive school being forced on the people of Lurgan, Portadown and Tandragee. Young people would all be forced into one institution on the basis of a one-size-fits-all approach. That will not and cannot meet the individual educational needs of the young people of the Craigavon area. Ultimately, young people who need support for their educational needs would not receive the level of tailored assistance that they currently enjoy in the senior high school. Those who need to be stretched and academically challenged would not be able to enjoy that in settings such as the Lurgan and Portadown colleges. Both have a rich history and are famous for their ability to nurture and grow young people's knowledge base. Some of our young people are more academically gifted, and some are more vocationally gifted. That is how the world works. However, forcing all young people into one comprehensive school would lead to their individual skills being ignored. As such, their educational development would be stunted.

The Democratic Unionist Party MP, MLAs and councillors have listened to the people. We have taken to the doors and consulted with the public. We are unequivocal in our support for option B in the most recent consultation. Option B is the only option to retain the Dickson plan as is and provide a newbuild for a senior high school through an amalgamation of Lurgan College and Portadown College. Option A is a smokescreen and an attempt to lure people into a false sense of security. It claims to retain the Dickson plan, but it in no way does that.

7.00 pm

The debate is particularly timely as the SELB advisory subcommittee will meet tomorrow morning. I trust that it will not be led by officials but will make the right decision, not only for present generations but for future generations. Parties in the Chamber have members on that Committee, and I hope that they will use their influence on this vital issue tomorrow.

In closing, I want to quote from the famous C. S. Lewis, whose father, incidentally, attended Lurgan College. He wrote:

"The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts."

Many deserts have been irrigated, and many pupils have reached their full potential through the Dickson two-tier system. Minister, I urge you not to axe a system that has widespread support and is so precious to the community that it has served so well.

Mrs D Kelly: I have four children, three of whom went through the junior high and senior high system under the Dickson plan. My other child attended Lismore Comprehensive School, which I think is the Minister's alma mater. I have to say that both systems served my children well. The important thing was that they and their parents had a choice, which is critical.

A number of interesting things are happening in the Upper Bann area, particularly in Craigavon. As the Minister and others in the Chamber will know, there is a great emphasis on providing opportunities for shared education. There is also an area learning plan in the Craigavon area.

Research published some time ago suggested that the Dickson plan and streaming at age 14 was a system that served young people's needs much better because they were better informed and more mature, and it is hard to argue against that. There are also, of course, a number of young people from the Craigavon area who vote with their feet. I am not sure how many are involved — I am sure that the Minister can give us the figures — but something like up to 200 young people from Upper Bann travel to grammar schools outside their immediate location at age 11.

We must urgently get some certainty in our education system and schools and ensure that parents' choice comes first. However, more importantly, we must ensure that each child has access to a good education — the type of education that meets their specific needs and ability to learn. Although many of the schools in Craigavon are rightly recognised for their high academic achievement, over 20% of young people still do not achieve the basic grades at GCSE and A level. So there is something fundamentally skewed in the provision of education in the area.

The SDLP opposes academic selection at age 11 for very good reasons, and I am sure that the Minister will again articulate some of the

research that backs up that position. However, other reports have been commissioned — I am grateful to the Assembly's Research and Information Service and the Education Committee's research for providing analysis on these matters over the past few years — and, as far as some of their authors were concerned, the jury was out on the Dickson plan.

Children have to get used to disappointment. We cannot all be stars, and we cannot all be A*s. I know that, at age 14, a cohort of maybe 80-plus will get into the senior high school system, and others will go into another system. Some children are rightly very disappointed. I know that a number of parents pay for extra tuition fees for their children, even at the age of 14. That is not available to all parents, and many may make sacrifices for that. However, it is also about whether parents have the economic ability to contribute to such tuition classes.

Some of the reports related that the collaboration that ought to work across the educational sector could be improved on to improve the outcomes of the Dickson plan. I hope that those involved in the Craigavon area learning plan will take it forward.

I am very concerned about the future of Drumcree College, and I am sure that the Minister shares my concerns. Its numbers have dropped drastically to 200, yet Lismore Comprehensive School has either 1,160 or 1,260 pupils. Drumcree College is the only post-primary Catholic maintained school in the Portadown area. I am not too sure whether the Minister can shed any light on the matter, but one of the facts that I ascertained is that Drumcree College is not included in the Craigavon area learning community. Therefore, it does not have the same access to some of the potential shared education as Lurgan College, St Michael's Grammar School and other schools in the district.

Therefore, the Dickson plan —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Will the Member bring her remarks to a close, please?

Mrs D Kelly: — provides the ability to choose subjects and career pathways at age 14, which is a much better age at which to do that. We should not throw the baby out with the bath water. We must have a system in place —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — that has the confidence of all.

Mrs Dobson: I welcome the Adjournment debate and thank Mr Moutray for tabling the topic. My views on the current Dickson plan structure are clear to all Members present, and I believe that they are shared by the vast majority of pupils, parents, teachers and the public in the catchment area. From the outset, I put on record my deep admiration for the dedicated service and leadership of all principals and staff, past and present, of controlled primary and post-primary schools in the catchment area.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Does she agree with me that there is huge public support for the retention of the Dickson plan system in the area that it serves, including parts of my Newry and Armagh constituency, and that it continues to produce top-quality education for pupils and students in that region? Does the Member further agree that it would be unwise of any Minister of Education to ignore the views of the overwhelming majority of parents by seeking to impose a solution and attempting to dismantle the Dickson plan?

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

Mrs Dobson: Yes. I thank my colleague for that intervention. He makes valid points and is 100% right: his is a widely held view of the Dickson plan. It is very popular in the area.

In recent weeks and months, as the threats to the Dickson plan have amplified, I have had the opportunity to meet personally many of those involved. Indeed, families across upper Bann are waking up to that very real threat. Uncertainty is playing heavily on the mind of many people — parents, grandparents and great-grandparents alike. Families such as mine have much for which to be grateful to Mr Dickson; namely, for putting in place a system that has educated generations of children in upper Bann, which has directly resulted in making Craigavon the commercial and industrial hub of Northern Ireland that it is today. I am sure that even the Minister is not oblivious to those strongly held feelings.

The retention of the principles of the Dickson plan will guarantee the future of Lurgan and Portadown colleges as selective grammar schools for 14- to 19-year-olds, and that should be a key consideration in any future arrangement. That having been said, I am fully aware of the much publicised and long-

unaddressed accommodation issues at Craigavon Senior High School. However, in seeking to address those issues, there is a duty not to irreparably damage schools and, by implication, the education of pupils who attend schools that are not experiencing the same dire level of need.

The outright rejection of the SELB's previous area planning proposal for a collegiate system by 86% of respondents came as no surprise, but the threat did not end there. The most recent proposal of option A, as mentioned by Mr Moutray, with its proposed dilution of grammar school education at Lurgan and Portadown colleges, would be wholly unacceptable to so many in the community. However, there are a number of conflicting interests at play here.

Minister, I wrote to you twice last month highlighting concerns about the process adopted by the SELB in effectively pushing option A. In an almost steamroller approach, rules and conventions were set aside, including the scheme of management for controlled schools, and, indeed, the Nolan principles of public life. I am sure that all in the House will agree with me that decisions made by those in a position of authority must be visible and beyond reproach. That is why I wrote to you calling for an immediate public inquiry into the entire SELB area planning process — an inquiry that I am confident will highlight the failings in due process and result in the reset button being pressed on the current threat to the two-tier system.

There is also clear evidence that option A, with its dilution of the grammar schools, would run contrary to the agreement at St Andrews — an agreement that many claimed would ensure that any future Education Minister would not be able to superimpose a non-academic selection system on schools. The First Minister is also on record admonishing the Environment Minister over John Lewis and saying that it should not be a matter for one Minister. Surely this issue is of greater impact and should therefore be a matter for the Executive as a whole, rather than one Minister being allowed to take a frankly blinkered and dogmatic approach.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dobson: No, my time is nearly up. As a member of the Education Committee, I have raised and praised the Dickson plan and its outcome for generations of children in Craigavon on countless occasions. Although the clear and present danger facing the Dickson

plan comes from the SELB area planning, it is equally clear that a much greater long-term threat comes from the proposed Education Bill. The Ulster Unionist Party is united in its determination to oppose that Bill and the ultimate power it would give to any future Education Minister.

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

Mrs Dobson: If the SELB is threatening the Dickson plan system, I submit that that threat would pale into insignificance compared to those present under the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). I support the Dickson plan, and urge its retention.

Mr Anderson: I welcome the opportunity to participate in the debate this evening. I thank my colleague Stephen Moutray for securing the debate. The threat that Dickson is currently under has caused much public outcry, with pupils past and present, teachers, principals past and present and parents making strong representations to us as elected representatives to do all that is physically possible to protect the Dickson form of education from the metaphorical axe that the SELB is wielding.

The Dickson two-tier system has delivered consistently for the people of Craigavon and Tandragee, with many thousands of our young people over four decades having availed themselves of that unique educational experience. Indeed, many have publicly hailed the success of the Dickson plan form of education in recent days and weeks. We have heard Mr Moutray refer to the chief executive of the SELB.

However, I wish to quote from a retired former principal who has recently commented on the proposals. Mr Harry Armstrong, former principal of Portadown College, stated:

"A proposed change to any established educational system, particularly one as successful as the two-tier system, must be judged very critically whether or not an improvement is likely, and, in that process, all those affected now, and in the near future, should be fully briefed on the details, implications, knock-on effects and possible consequences."

He has also been extremely critical of the lack of detail on the proposals and the absence of any real opportunity to tease out all of the implications. I have to agree with him on that,

and I believe that the SELB should be held accountable for its unacceptable bias in its most recent consultation, when it clearly weighs heavily towards option A. I believe that Harry could still educate us on a thing or two. Indeed, I suggest that the SELB go to him for some extra tuition on that very matter. I believe, along with him, that the proposed collegiate bilateral fails on three criteria: the probability of increased educational standards, the increased financial efficiency, and the probability of the effect on the morale and level of motivation within the affected schools, and its effect on the degree of involvement, commitment, support and confidence of parents, boards of governors and the wider community.

We have been out in the community discussing the threats to the Dickson two-tier system; and, time and again, its distinctive features, such as delayed selection at age 14 as opposed to age 11, have been raised.

7.15 pm

The community also believes that there is a real benefit in schools having their own separate identity and autonomy. If a comprehensive, all-ability school is imposed against the will of the community, it will undoubtedly lose the backing and buy-in of that community and will result in a loss of families from the area as they seek the education that they require for their children elsewhere. At present, the cherished and respected Dickson plan system of education is under severe threat from people who wish to rid the community of a system that it overwhelmingly wishes to retain.

The SELB has brought forward proposals for the future of post-primary education in the Craigavon area. Option A would, ultimately, impose a system whereby, after children attend one of the local junior high schools, they would transfer to the bilateral all-ability comprehensive school where a one-size-fits-all method will be adopted. Meanwhile, option B is the only one that seeks to protect the Dickson two-tier system. Only option B will protect the provision of quality grammar school education in the Craigavon area and the high standard of vocation-oriented education that is offered by Craigavon Senior High School.

The SELB has also ignored the primary school sector and has not consulted it, even though there are 12,000 primary pupils in its board area. The impact of the proposed changes will be felt the most by those pupils. If the system is destroyed by option A, it will undoubtedly lead to fewer children attending local primary schools as families migrate to other areas.

More children will take the AQE test to transfer to grammar schools outside the Craigavon area. Indeed, the uncertainty that has been created by the SELB has already had an impact on parents who have decided to send their children elsewhere because of the difficulties and hurdles to come.

The Minister needs to look closely at the consultation process on which the SELB has embarked, given the issues that Members have raised in the House today. The public does not want to see the introduction of a comprehensive system in the Craigavon area. In fact, 83% of people said that in the previous consultation and I know that the SELB has received a similar deluge of responses to the most recent consultation.

I will finish with another comment by Mr Harry Armstrong, who stated:

"The two-tier system has been an outstanding success and should be regarded as a hugely valuable asset to this community. It may not be absolutely perfect but, in my view, the perceived imperfections can be corrected, with good will, inside the system."

Mr Irwin: I thank my colleague the Member for Upper Bann Stephen Moutray for securing this debate. There is one Dickson plan school in my constituency of Newry and Armagh, namely Tandragee Junior High School. The Dickson plan has served the Upper Bann and Tandragee catchment areas well for over 40 years. The achievements of pupils who were educated through the Dickson plan have been notable and, year on year, the results speak for themselves.

The unique attribute of the system whereby selection is carried out at age 14 means that young people are streamed to a school that better serves them at that stage of their development, matched to their emerging and growing abilities. That fact has been clearly demonstrated in the results. Indeed, in the recent consultation that was carried out by the SELB, 86% of people expressed a desire to retain the system. That comes from an overall satisfaction among parents, many of whom came through the Dickson plan themselves.

The phrase, "Do not fix what isn't broken" has been well used in relation to this issue over recent months and it is applicable to this debate. The option that makes the most sense is option B, and I have no hesitation in stating my desire to see the system retained. The pursuit of option A by the SELB and the

Minister does not have the support of my constituency, and many view option A as the removal of choice that would lead to a reversal of the reputation that the area enjoys for providing an all-encompassing educational experience for pupils.

The creation of a single-site senior high school in Portadown with a four-year model, and the retention of Portadown College and Lurgan College will ensure that choice is retained and that, most importantly, children are streamed to schools that meet their needs. Again, why fix what is not broken?

I have spoken to people in my constituency who have sent or currently send their children to one of the Dickson plan schools. Their overall response is one of contentment with the system.

Parents and pupils are content with the Dickson plan and see it as having a very valued future in the Craigavon and Tandragee catchments.

If we listen to the strong arguments put forward for its retention by the schools that have spoken out, we cannot countenance a comprehensive system that would undoubtedly dilute and undo the tremendous work that has been done through the Dickson plan since its inception. In my constituency of Newry and Armagh, we are listening attentively to arguments for and against a wide range of proposals for the future of controlled education in the constituency. There are options being debated for schools in Armagh city, Markethill and, as the debate today has highlighted, in Tandragee through the Dickson plan.

"Choice" is the key word in the argument, and it must be upheld. Tandragee Junior High School continues to perform magnificently and, as a school in my constituency, caters exceptionally well for its pupils. Indeed, it performs admirably financially. The school is a fantastic resource and continues to develop and ensure that its pupils have the very best opportunities. Those attributes are noted and supported through this debate, and I fully support the efforts of my party colleagues in Upper Bann to put forward a clear message to the SELB and the Minister. That is a message that I fully support, add my voice to and agree with.

Mr Kinahan: I speak on behalf of Mr Gardiner, who is chairing a board of governors meeting this evening. I thank Mr Moutray for securing tonight's debate.

I start by going on record as saying, as others have, that the Dickson plan has served the

north Armagh area well over the last 40 years. It removed the negative aspects of selection at age 11, allowed late developers to develop and provided what was, in many ways, a model school structure that the entire Province would have done well to follow. It has also produced some notable educational achievements and a long record of excellent examination results in what are some of the Province's best schools. Why it needs to be altered escapes most people in north Armagh.

Support for the Dickson plan remains vigorous and strong across the Craigavon area. Recently, a consultation by the Southern Education and Library Board on the post-primary area plan, as we have heard, demonstrated that 86% wanted to retain the system. With that level of support, we have to ask the Minister why he persists with his attempts to dismantle it. Do his plans for the future of education command that level of support in the rest of the Province? The answer is definitely no. When we look at the ESA Bill, from the survey that I have done, a similar figure — 85% — do not even know what is in the Bill, so they do not know whether to support it or not.

It is clear that the Minister intends to use force on the education system. Indeed, the maintained sector in Lurgan has already been submitted to that. Now the Minister wants to extend that to the controlled state sector. This is a system that —

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I do not think it is appropriate for a Member to stand up and accuse a Minister of using force in his role. If the Member has an accusation to make about me abusing or not following my ministerial code of conduct, he should make that through the formal channels instead of making wild allegations such as that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I did actually note that remark. I remind the Member about the Speaker's ruling about good temper and moderation in language.

Mr Kinahan: I take back the word "force". It is the mental method of making it happen, which is a type of force, but I take back that comment. Now I have lost my place.

Many people now want to recreate the grammar schools that we have in England and that have been a great success there for the last 50 years. Those schools are the one way of giving people a chance, especially the disadvantaged.

We should retain that here, in the form of the Dickson plan, in Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Kinahan: I would like to carry on for a moment.

I have called on the Minister many times to sit down with us and discuss the future of selection and grammar schools openly with all parties. However, to date, despite his saying that he has an open door, we have never yet had a chance to do that. Consensus has to be the way forward, and the Dickson plan is one of the best examples. We should go forward in that manner.

Recently, in the national press, we heard Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector of Education, say that the present state system in England was failing to nurture the brightest people. That is the system that we are trying to put in place here. The report says that bright children are being systematically failed by England's non-selective secondary schools. The Dickson plan here assures that that does not happen.

We need to be clear that the destruction of the Province's grammar schools is Sinn Féin's aim. Most of us suspect that that has more to do with denying opportunity to children whose parents cannot afford private education so that they cannot get on in the world than it has to do with educational ideas. The Sinn Féin plans will end up creating an underclass. These often illogical and discredited educational ideas, which I have referred to in previous speeches as Marxist, are very much Sinn Féin's Marxist text book of the 1970s. I feel that they are often based on prejudice rather than on facts. The principle that should guide educational change should be to retain what is working well in the system and to build up the parts of the system that are not working. It should not be to dumb it all down.

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

Mr Kinahan: We are here to support the Dickson plan and option B, and I am glad to see such good support from many of the other parties. I hope that they will do the same in opposing the ESA Bill.

Mr Storey: I place on record my appreciation to my colleagues in Upper Bann, who, for a long time, have campaigned on many of the challenging issues in any structure or any system, no less when an area plan is being

presented for a particular location. I place on record my appreciation to the MP for the area and my MLA colleagues. We have met representatives from the schools in Craigavon numerous times over the past number of years. That was a new experience for me because, in my part of the world, in north Antrim, the structure of Dickson and the two-tier system is totally foreign to us. However, it is abundantly clear that the people whom Dickson serves have given their support to that system.

I welcome the fact that the Minister is here. We have had our differences on many issues, and I am sure that we will continue to have them. However, on these occasions, he commits himself to be here to listen to the arguments. I know that it always heartens him when I stay on and participate in these debates.

Let us get to the core of the issue. The education and library board will determine the future of Dickson tomorrow. I wanted the Member to take an intervention. I want the Ulster Unionist Party to give us an assurance in this House tonight — I will be happy to sit down and allow it the opportunity to do so — that it has done all that it can to ensure that its party members who have a vote to cast do not in any way support option A tomorrow. It is fine to come to this House, throw salvos at the Minister and blame everybody else, but a decision will be taken tomorrow by the education and library board. Will that be endorsed by those over whom, we believe, the Ulster Unionist Party has control? The focus of the debate has to be on ensuring that what parents have bought into and what pupils have benefited from is maintained and improved upon.

7.30 pm

I have no doubt that, like any other system, there are issues in the Dickson plan that could be improved upon and enhanced. However, when I see the conditions that prevail at the minute at the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School, I think that it is scandalous that we have young people in such conditions and that they are basically hemmed in by and landlocked in a provision that I think is well past its sell-by date. The Minister well knows that I have repeatedly suggested that, whenever we look at these plans, we put in a capital alignment plan that says, "This is what will happen should a proposal be agreed on about the future structures in your area." Of course, we know that Lurgan College does not have the capital provision that it was promised. Let us also remember what is different about the Dickson plan: we are talking about schools that are in the controlled sector. So, as passionate

as my party and I are about the matter, let us remember that some have come late to defending the controlled sector. Some have decided that it is probably now politically advantageous for them to advance the controlled sector, but let us also remember that it is not all about just one sector over another. It is about the tapestry of educational provision, whether that is in the junior or senior sector in Craigavon, a grammar school or a non-selective secondary school. I think that that provision has served us well, even though there are issues and challenges that I believe we have to address.

Mr Moutray: I appreciate my colleague giving way. He referred a second ago to the meeting of the education subcommittee of the SELB that will be held tomorrow morning in Armagh. Can I confirm that our representative on that subcommittee will vote for option B? Like the Member, I hope that the Ulster Unionists can confirm tonight that its two representatives on that board will also fall in behind us.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I also thank him for that confirmation. It is easy for us to accuse others and to tell them what they should do, but there is an opportunity for people at the meeting of the education and library board to indicate clearly where they stand on the future of the Dickson plan.

I would not agree with Mr Kinahan that you can somehow replicate the Dickson plan across Northern Ireland. That is because there are people in many other sectors of our education system who would not be comfortable replicating what is in that plan. However, if we go to Kilkeel, we find that another system operates there, and if we go —

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

Mr Kinahan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes. I do not have time, but I am happy to give way.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much for giving way. I was not proposing that we replicate —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry, but the Member's time is up. I call the Minister of Education.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas le

Stephen Moutray as an ábhar díospóireachta seo a ardú. I thank Stephen Moutray for raising this topic of debate.

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I am very clear that my main aims as Education Minister are to raise educational attainment levels and to close the performance gap that is still evident in our system. To help to achieve that, we must ensure that all our young people have access to a broad and balanced curriculum. We must ensure that we equip our children with the knowledge and skills that they need to be active contributors to society and to the economy in the future. We must also ensure that none of our children is left behind. I will return to that subject later.

To do that, we need a network of schools that are educationally and financially sustainable and can deliver the revised curriculum and the entitlement framework. We also need to make best use of the resources available to us. That will require change. It will require sectors coming together to plan to meet the needs of all children, regardless of their background or where they live.

I appreciate that change can be difficult. It takes strong leadership to bring forward a change process for the greater good, and it takes courage to implement that change. Area planning provides us with the opportunity to bring about that change and to develop creative and innovative solutions that are in young people's best interests. It is, of course, for the school managing authorities in the first instance to plan the future pattern of education provision. They must take the broad view and set aside narrow sectoral interests to put the interests of children above the interests of institutions.

At this point, it may be worth reminding all parties in the Chamber that they have no representatives on the boards. The DUP representative there is representing whichever council he or she was nominated from. The Ulster Unionist representative there is representing the council by which he or she was nominated. I would be concerned if we were to start bandying about what our party colleagues are going to do. They are answerable to other structures, rather than party structures.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Mr O'Dowd: Very quickly.

Mr Storey: Will the Minister accept that, given that they represent local authorities, based on the survey that has been carried out, the majority of those in the local authorities are exercising their right to express an opinion that is opposed to the plan?

Mr O'Dowd: I am not questioning the members' voting tomorrow. They will vote as they see fit. What I am saying is that they have to be careful not to go into the room representing political parties.

In one sense, it is fortunate that I am here as Minister, but, in another, it is unfortunate because then there would be an alternative voice on the Dickson plan coming from the Floor. To the Members opposite, the Dickson plan is two schools: Lurgan College and Portadown College. Indeed, during Question Time in this Chamber once, I had to remind Members on the opposite Benches that there were more than two schools in the Dickson plan. There is Clounagh Junior High; Craigavon Senior High; Killicomaine Junior High School; Lurgan Junior High School; St Mary's High School, Lurgan, in the Catholic sector; St Paul's Junior High School, Lurgan, in the Catholic sector; and Tandragee Junior High School. Then, there are the colleges: Portadown College and Lurgan College and St Michael's in the Catholic sector. I appreciate that, tonight, we are dealing only with the controlled sector because of the role of the SELB and so on, but the Members opposite had to be reminded of those other schools because they were fixated on the needs of only two of the schools: Lurgan College and Portadown College. That is where the mistake lies in their debate.

The origins of the Dickson plan, a feature of our current educational structure in the Craigavon and Armagh areas, lie in agreed local arrangements, but it cannot be viewed in isolation. An area plan should meet the needs of all the children in the area. I am on record as stating that the Dickson plan is a form of academic selection. Many Members have said that it is academic selection at 14 and that makes it better. The flaw in the plan is that, at 14, children are separated into different schools, and no one has ever given an explanation for that. Why cannot those children be educated in the one educational centre, where they remain among their peers and school friends who they have gone to school with since primary school? Why do we have to separate them at 14 to ensure that they have an excellent education? Selection involves rejection.

Mrs Kelly made the interesting comment that children have to learn failure. That is an interesting philosophy, but, the difficulty for me with this arrangement is that children who experience failure usually come from the lower socio-economic groups. That is totally unacceptable.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will go on, because I am conscious of the time.

The statistics on free school meals at the schools involved in the Dickson plan make interesting reading. At Tandragee Junior High School, free school meal entitlement is 13.7%; at Craigavon Senior High School, it is 20.9%; at St Paul's Boys High School, it is 25.6%; and, at St Mary's Girls High School, it is 21.3%. Now to the two schools that the Members opposite are most interested in. At Lurgan College, it is 5.3%, and, at Portadown College, it is 4%. Is the Dickson plan serving all of the children of the Craigavon and Armagh areas? On those figures, it is not.

Let us move on to educational attainment in the Dickson plan area. In fairness to the controlled sector in the Craigavon area, I do not think that all its views have been reflected here tonight. Both before and since becoming Minister, I have had the opportunity to engage with a wide sector of the educationalists in the Craigavon area. I disagree with some of them, and some of them disagree with me, and others have their own points of view around many matters. I engage with others regularly. It has always been done in a courteous and respectful manner, even among those who disagree with each other, and I hope and have no doubt that that will continue. The latest school leavers' data shows that the Dickson plan schools underperformed against both the Southern Board and overall averages at GCSE and at A level. So, how can Members say that it is world-class and that it is a leading educational system when it is actually underperforming against schools in the Southern Board area and against grammar schools here as well? The facts speak for themselves. At GCSE, 57% of school leavers achieve five or more A to C grades in the Dickson plan schools as against 61% for the Southern Board area and 62% across the North. For three or more A levels at A to C, the figure for the Dickson plan is 35% against 37% for the Southern Board and 36% overall. Of course, there are variations across the Dickson plan area, but none of the schools beats the Southern Board average, and none of them beats our local average.

I am also concerned about the 43% of school leavers in the Dickson plan area who do not achieve five good GCSEs including English and maths. Does it serve all the children? Not according to that figure. It was also notable that three selective 14- to 18-year-old schools admitted far fewer pupils entitled to free school meals than the non-selective schools. That mirrors the position right across our selective sector.

My focus is on addressing educational underachievement wherever it exists and driving out inequalities in our education system, and I apologise to no one for that. Mr Kinahan seems to be better versed in the English education system than in our own. I suggest that he reads up on our education system. I am not sure that even he believes some of the stuff that he comes out with about my party, Sinn Féin, and what I do and do not believe in. It is fantasy politics, and sometimes it is quite dangerous politics. I suggest that he reads his speech before he comes into the Chamber and ensures that whoever writes it for him does not put in any of that stuff. I suspect that Barack Obama knows more about the education system here than Mr Kinahan does.

With changes across the sectors, Members will be aware that —

Mr Kinahan: On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I was called up earlier for something that I said, and I would also like you to look at what he has just said.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. We will do that.

Mr O'Dowd: Members are aware that the Catholic sector is moving away from the Dickson plan towards having a single school on one site. Interestingly, it has been proposed that that school will be a non-selective voluntary grammar school. That is achievable under current legislation because grammar status refers to a school's ability to charge fees, not its admissions criteria. The school will also hold on to its voluntary status. So, there is a very interesting proposal in the Catholic sector: a non-selective voluntary grammar school that meets the needs of all the children in the area. I put a challenge to those who support the Dickson plan: why can that not be achieved in the controlled sector?

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

Mr O'Dowd: I await the outcome of the discussions with the Southern Board. I will take all the evidence on board before I make any final decisions on the Dickson plan area. My decisions will be evidence-based. I assure Members that, when I make my decision on the Dickson plan area, I will not ignore 43% of the children who live there.

Adjourned at 7.43 pm.



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