

Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 25 February 2013
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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

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

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 25 February 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matter of the Day

Cycling: Martyn Irvine

Mr Speaker: Conall McDevitt has been given leave to make a statement on Martyn Irvine becoming a world champion track cyclist that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should continually rise in their place. All Members called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject.

Mr McDevitt: Those who believe that success in track cycling is just a matter of throwing money at a rider and some fancy aerodynamic kit should look no further than Newtownards rider Martyn Irvine's gold and silver medals at last week's world championship cycling event in Minsk. Steven Beacom captured it brilliantly in the 'Belfast Telegraph' when he wrote:

"Not bad for a bloke who told me ... last year that he was a couch potato when he was a kid and did all he could to get out of PE at Movilla High School in Newtownards. Martyn didn't take up cycling until he was 18 ... Winning a silver in the Individual Pursuit event at the World Track Championships in Minsk ... was a magnificent effort. We'd have settled for that ... Joyously though there was more to come. Much more. Less than an hour after taking silver, Martyn followed it up by claiming gold in the Scratch race. Remarkable. Put this down as one of the finest sporting feats ever accomplished by an Ulsterman. And it was the staggering way he did it that made his victory even more heroic. Despite being almost out on his feet after his earlier exertions, with 10 out of the 60 laps to go in the Scratch event, he broke from the bunch and basically just went for it sprinting away with every last drop of energy he had. No guts, no glory ... Martyn Irvine – Champion of the world!"

Those are Mr Beacom's words, not mine. It was an extraordinary achievement: the equivalent in athletics would be a medal in the

400 metres at the Olympic Games followed an hour later by gold in the 3,000 metres. He has done it all on a shoestring. It is what they call paniagua in cycling — bread and water. It means two things: you ride clean, but you ride with very little resource. The budget for track cycling in Ireland is well under €100,000, which is just under £90,000. Compare that with the £8 million a year available to the GB team in this Olympic cycle. It goes mainly to fund Martyn and Caroline Ryan, who won bronze last year in a points race, and they spend much of their time training in Majorca, pooling their track time so that they get the necessary hours in. I want us to do more than just honour him today. I want us to invest in him and to make him as proud of us as we are, undoubtedly, proud of him.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for tabling this Matter of the Day regarding a Newtownards man and, indeed, one of my constituents, Martyn Irvine. Over the past few years, the interest in competitive cycling has increased massively, thanks in no small part to some now almost iconic British cyclists, such as Sir Chris Hoy, Sir Bradley Wiggins, Victoria Pendleton and our own Wendy Houvenaghel, who tasted world championship success in the team pursuit in the 2008, 2009 and 2011 track world championships. It is fantastic that another local emulated that success by winning gold in the scratch discipline at last week's world championships in Minsk. Amazingly, as Mr McDevitt said, he won his gold medal in a 15 km race only an hour after winning in a 4 km race in the individual pursuit. This achievement is made all the more remarkable, considering the meagre resources that are available to him. Even Martyn himself commented:

"You couldn't live on what I'm living on".

All of Newtownards, Strangford and, indeed, Northern Ireland should be extremely proud of what Martyn has done through his hard work, his discipline and his endeavour.

Coincidentally, Martyn's success came on the day that it was announced that the Giro d'Italia

is coming to Northern Ireland in May 2014, thanks to the work of the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Tourist Board in securing this. It is an event that draws a television audience of 800 million and is broadcast live to 165 countries. I hope that what the likes of Wendy Houvenaghel and Martyn Irvine have achieved can inspire a generation and that, with major events such as the Giro d'Italia being held here, Northern Ireland can be more than just the capital of golf. In conclusion, I wish Martyn well in his future races and, in particular, when he represents Northern Ireland in next year's Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Déanaim comhghairdeas fosta le Martyn ar an ócáid stairiúil seo. I congratulate Martyn Irvine on the occasion of winning silver and, indeed, the world championship for Ireland.

As other Members have said, it was a very historic day in Minsk for Irish cycling, and this comes on the back of a remarkable number of months for Martyn, including, of course, his participation in the 2012 Olympics and his success in the Track World Cup in November and now this spectacular double win. It is a fairy-tale story of a boy who went from being a mechanic to a cyclist and has now become a world champion. We give our heartiest congratulations to Martyn. I also take this opportunity to pass our congratulations to Kelly Gallagher for winning the bronze medal in the women's downhill and silver in the Super-G. They have both done us proud, as, indeed, has the Ireland women's rugby team in winning the Triple Crown. At this moment in time, the less said about the men's team the better. I cannot let it go without congratulating Derry on a great start to the National Hurling League at Celtic Park yesterday.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the previous Member who spoke for saving me the bother of having to read the sports pages to find out what happened over the weekend. Like Miss McIlveen, I take a particular pride in the achievement of Martyn Irvine, because he comes from the Strangford constituency and its main town of Newtownards. The Member for South Belfast gave us some context for the scale of the achievement, which is hard to overstate. The last time a man from these shores won a world track event, distances were measured in miles, not in metres. The year was 1896. Members will know that as a famous year, not least for the shortest war in recorded history — the Anglo-Zanzibar war — which, as we all remember, started at 9.00 am and

finished 45 minutes later. That was one minute less than it took GB and Northern Ireland to win a hat-trick of golds at last summer's London Olympics. However, that golden 46 minutes was the work of three athletes: Rutherford, Farah and Ennis. Martyn Irvine took less than an hour to win two individual medals: silver in the individual pursuit; and gold in that 15-kilometre scratch. He was only bettered once by the reigning champion in the individual pursuit.

The whole of Newtownards will come together to celebrate that achievement, as will the whole of Strangford, remembering that this is not exceptional for the area. Syckerika McMahon recently won silver at the Euro swimming championships.

I congratulate Martyn Irvine. There will be pride at Movilla High School, his old school, in Newtownards, in Strangford and across Northern Ireland and pride across the whole of Ireland because he won wearing an Irish vest. I look forward to seeing Martyn in Northern Ireland colours next year at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow.

Mr McCarthy: It gives me great pleasure to join my colleagues in congratulating Martyn Irvine from Newtownards on his fantastic achievement. He won the gold and silver medals at the world cycling championship last week. We are absolutely thrilled and delighted. I had the pleasure a couple of years ago, as chairman of Ards Borough Council sports development committee, of awarding Martyn the title of "Sportsperson of the Year". At that time, we in the committee obviously saw the talents that Martyn had and his determination and potential, and his performance last week proved us right in our confidence in that talent and ability.

Martyn certainly proved his excellence on the world stage last week. He brought great credit not only to himself but to his family, his home town of Newtownards, Northern Ireland and, indeed, the whole island. We wholeheartedly congratulate Martyn on his wonderful achievement and performance, and we wish him well for the future.

While I am on my feet, I also congratulate the Irish ladies' rugby team on bringing the Triple Crown home to Ireland. We are a nation of sportspeople, and we can bring the gold home to Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Mr McNarry: My Strangford constituency, which has an exceedingly fine reputation for sports activities, including cycling, greeted the

success of Newtownards man Martyn Irvine with a wide-ranging rendition of plaudits, which has been added to here. My own would be "Fantastically brilliant", "World champion indeed" and "Well done, Martyn".

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have been given notice by the members of the Business Committee of a motion to extend today's sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A). The Question on the motion will be put without debate.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 25 February 2013 be extended to no later than 8.00pm. — [Mrs Overend.]

Committee Membership: Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

Mr Speaker: The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion. Therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Robin Swann replace Mr John McCallister on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. — [Mrs Overend.]

12.15 pm

Executive Committee Business

Criminal Justice Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: Members will recall that, due to the tabling of a petition of concern against amendment Nos 21, 24 and 26, proceedings on the Bill were halted last Tuesday after the Question was put on amendment No 20. The remaining amendments will be moved formally as we go through the Bill, and the Question on each will be put without further debate. The Question on stand part will be taken at the appropriate points of the Bill. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Schedule 2 (Articles 63B to 63O of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989, as inserted)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 21 has already been debated and is mutually exclusive with amendment No 22.

The following amendment stood on the Marshalled List:

No 21: In page 15, line 41, leave out from beginning to end of line 3 on page 16 and insert

"and

(c) the Northern Ireland Commissioner for the Retention of Biometric Material has consented under Article 63DA to the retention of the material."— [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): As indicated last week, I will not move the amendment.

Amendment No 21 not moved.

Amendment No 22 proposed:

In page 16, line 1, leave out paragraph (d) and insert

"(d) the District Judge (Magistrates' Court) has made an order under paragraph (13) for the retention of the material." — [Mr McCartney.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 32; Noes 56.

AYES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch and Ms McCorley

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy

Question accordingly negatived.

Amendment No 23 proposed: In page 16, line 26, leave out paragraphs (11) and (12). — [Mr McCartney.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 32; Noes 55.

AYES

Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr

Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lynch and Ms McCorley

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy

Question accordingly negated.

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 24 has already been debated and is mutually exclusive with amendment No 25.

Amendment No 24 not moved.

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 25 as it is consequential to amendment No 22, which has not been made. I will not call amendment No 26 as it is consequential to amendment No 24, which has not been made.

Amendment No 27 proposed: In page 19, line 14, at end insert

"Retention of Article 63B material: persons completing diversionary youth conference

63HB.—(1) This Article applies to Article 63B material which—

(a) relates to a person who has completed the diversionary youth conference process with respect to a recordable offence; and

(b) was taken (or, in the case of a DNA profile, derived from a sample taken) in connection with the investigation of the offence.

(2) The material may be retained until—

(a) in the case of fingerprints, the end of the period of 5 years beginning with the date on which the fingerprints were taken, and

(b) in the case of a DNA profile, the end of the period of 5 years beginning with—

(i) the date on which the DNA sample from which the profile was derived was taken, or

(ii) if the profile was derived from more than one DNA sample, the date on which the first of those samples was taken.

(3) For the purposes of this Article, a person completes the diversionary youth conference process with respect to an offence if (and only if)—

(a) a diversionary youth conference under Part 3A of the Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 has been completed with respect to that person and that offence, and

(b) the Director of Public Prosecutions, having considered the report of the youth conference co-ordinator, has determined not to institute proceedings against the person in respect of the offence or, as the case may be, not to continue proceedings already instituted against the person in respect of the offence."

— [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 45.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Lo and Mr McCarthy

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment No 28 made: In page 19, line 14, at end insert

"Retention of Article 63B material: persons given a penalty notice

63HC.—(1) This Article applies to Article 63B material which—

(a) relates to a person who is given a penalty notice under section 60 of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and in respect of whom no proceedings are brought for the offence to which the notice relates, and

(b) was taken (or, in the case of a DNA profile, derived from a sample taken) from the person in connection with the investigation of the offence to which the notice relates.

(2) The material may be retained—

(a) in the case of fingerprints, for a period of 2 years beginning with the date on which the fingerprints were taken,

(b) in the case of a DNA profile, for a period of 2 years beginning with —

(i) the date on which the DNA sample from which the profile was derived was taken, or

(ii) if the profile was derived from more than one DNA sample, the date on which the first of those samples was taken." — [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Amendment No 29 proposed: In page 19, line 14, at end insert

"Retention of Article 63B material: persons under 18 given a caution

63HA.—(1) This Article applies to Article 63B material which —

(a) relates to a person who —

(i) is given a caution in respect of a recordable offence which, at the time of the caution, the person admitted; and

(ii) is aged under 18 at the time of the offence, and

(b) was taken (or, in the case of a DNA profile, derived from a sample taken) in connection with the investigation of the offence.

(2) The material may be retained until —

(a) in the case of fingerprints, the end of the period of 5 years beginning with the date on which the fingerprints were taken, and

(b) in the case of a DNA profile, the end of the period of 5 years beginning with —

(i) the date on which the DNA sample from which the profile was derived was taken, or

(ii) if the profile was derived from more than one DNA sample, the date on which the first of those samples was taken." — [Mr A Maginness.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 46; Noes 44.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Byrne and Mr Durkan

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Campbell, Mr

Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Amendment No 30 not moved.

Schedule 2, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 3 (Amendments: fingerprints, DNA profiles, etc.)

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 31, as it is consequential to amendment Nos 18 and 19, which have not been made.

Amendment No 32 made: In page 23, line 12, leave out from "that has come" to the end of line 13 and insert

"which—

(a) has been taken by the police from a person—

(i) under a power conferred by Article 62 or 63; or

(ii) with the consent of that person, in connection with the investigation of an offence by the police;

(b) consists of or includes human cells; and

(c) was taken for the purpose of deriving a DNA profile from it". — [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Amendment No 33 proposed: In page 23, line 29, leave out "which" and insert

"—

(i) which was committed when that person was aged 18 or over, and

(ii) which". — [Mr A Maginness.]

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 45.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Byrne and Mr Rogers

NOES

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

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Mr Speaker: I will not call amendment No 34 as it is consequential to amendment No 26, which has not been made.

Schedule 3, as amended, agreed to.

Schedule 4 (Repeals)

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 35 is consequential to amendment No 10.

Amendment No 35 made: In page 24, line 17, at end insert

"PART 1

SEX OFFENDERS

Short Title	Extent of repeal
<i>The Sexual Offences Act 2003 (c. 42)</i>	Sections 97 to 101. In section 136(8) "101".

— [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: Amendment Nos 36 and 37 are consequential to amendment No 13.

Amendment No 36 made: In page 24, leave out line 25 and insert:

	"In section 4(5), paragraph (b) and the word "or" immediately before it. Section 5(1). Section 5(13)."
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— [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Amendment No 37 made: In page 24, line 26, column 2, at beginning insert

	"Section 57(2)(a). Section 58(2)(a). Section 59(2)(a)."
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— [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Schedule 4, as amended, agreed to.

Long Title

Amendment No 38 made: Leave out "and to" and insert "; to". — [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 39 is consequential to amendment No 14.

Amendment No 39 made: At end insert

"; to provide for the release on licence of persons detained under Article 45(2) of the Criminal Justice (Children) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998". — [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 40 is consequential to amendment No 15.

Amendment No 40 made: At end insert

"; and to amend Article 21BA of the Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999". — [Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Speaker: Amendment No 41 is consequential to amendment No 16.

Amendment No 41 made: At end insert

"and to abolish the common law offence of scandalising the judiciary". — [Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice).]

Long title, as amended, agreed to.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Criminal Justice Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister for Regional Development to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development).]

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been selected, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Water and Sewerage Services (Amendment) Bill today. Its Further Consideration Stage is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Budget Bill: Final Stage

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

That the Budget Bill [NIA 18/11-15] do now pass.

Today's Final Stage of the Budget Bill draws to a close the legislative process for the current financial year. The House has debated the Budget Bill and the Supply resolutions over the past few weeks, and I am sure that Members will be happy to hear that I do not intend to repeat everything that has been said. With the exception of one or two Members' contributions, the debate has by and large revolved around the financial issues relating to 2012-13 and has been useful. One or two, however, may have strayed from the path, and I suppose that that is to be expected. In fact, I may even have strayed along with them or been encouraged to stray along with them on occasions, and indulgence has been given to me to do that. I was particularly entertained by Members who began their speech by giving advance notice that they did not even intend to stay on the topic. It is always nice to know that Members recognise that they are not on the topic but will talk about whatever they have in their notes anyhow. Lest I be accused of the same thing, I will turn to today's business.

Mr Elliott: Never.

Mr Wilson: I am glad that the Member recognises that I tend not to do that.

The Budget Bill covers the 2012-13 financial year and provides legal authority to spend in the first few months of 2013-14. In the management of public expenditure, we began the year 2012-13 with an overcommitment that we sought to manage through the in-year monitoring process. Throughout the three monitoring rounds, we were able successfully to manage down that overcommitment, as well as reallocate surplus funding to key areas such as employment and health. However, it would be a mistake to say that we are now finished with budgets for 2012-13. There is still a lot to be done in the remaining weeks. Ministers and Committees must make every effort to ensure that departmental budgets are carefully managed, thereby ensuring that we minimise underspend and the risk of having to return funding to the Treasury.

Ministers and Committees should also now turn their attention to 2013-14. We should be in the latter stages of planning for the next financial

year, the first few months of which are covered by this Budget legislation. We must seek to ensure that public expenditure is fully utilised by Departments so that we maximise the budgets available. It is also critical that we seek to identify and redistribute additional funding as early as possible in the new financial year. The Vote on Account legislation in the Bill is crucial to that good start to 2013-14.

1.30 pm

I will spend a moment or two reflecting on 2012-13. This year was an important one for our tourism industry. Northern Ireland hosted the Irish Open, which brought much-needed tourism to the north coast and beyond. We also commemorated the centenary year of the Titanic, which also brought in much-needed tourism. In 2012-13, the Executive allocated some 30% of available current expenditure funding to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, again recognising that the health of our citizens underpins our society.

The Executive were able to provide £4 million as a response to the pseudomonas outbreak, £1.3 million to carry out repairs to Arvalee special school after the fire there and £1.5 million for emergency financial assistance for people whose properties were affected by flooding, proving again that the Executive have the power to respond swiftly to significant emerging issues. We were also able to allocate £19.9 million to the Department for Social Development (DSD) for co-ownership and housing initiatives to help to get people on the property ladder and £4 million for thermal improvements to Housing Executive homes, helping people on low incomes to save in energy costs.

I could go on, Mr Speaker, but I hope that these things give a flavour of the different ways in which the Assembly has delivered for our citizens, not to mention the delivery of ongoing routine public services on a day-to-day basis.

I move on to 2013-14. The Assembly will oversee many opportunities and challenges for our citizens. It is up to us to ensure that public services continue to be delivered, which is what this Vote on Account legislation intends to facilitate. Additionally, we must ensure that those public services are delivered in such a way as to maximise their use for the citizens of Northern Ireland. I now look forward to hearing from Members on this important legislation.

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

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.
Éirím le labhairt anseo inniu ar son an Choiste.
I speak on behalf of the Committee.

As Members will be aware, the Budget Bill provides the statutory authority for expenditure in 2012-13 as specified in the spring Supplementary Estimates, which encompasses what happened during the year's monitoring rounds. The Bill also includes the Vote on Account, which allows public expenditure to continue in the early part of the next financial year, until the Main Estimates for 2013-14 are voted on by the Assembly in early June.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel took evidence on the Budget Bill from Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) officials on 30 January. This evidence session marked the final stage of a process of scrutiny by the Committee of the 2012-13 in-year monitoring rounds. In addition to briefings on the Department's own position before and following the outcome of each monitoring round, the Committee also received briefings on the strategic and cross-departmental issues relating to public expenditure.

Under Standing Order 42(2), the Committee must determine that there has been appropriate consultation with it on the Budget Bill before recommending that it is content to grant accelerated passage. In this regard, the Committee welcomes the engagement with the Department during the quarterly monitoring rounds and on the Estimates and the Bill. It was particularly helpful for members to receive clarification on the details of the in-year technical changes to resource and capital allocations of Departments, some of which were quite significant. Clarification was also received on the limited headroom built into the spring Supplementary Estimates for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department of Justice, and members welcomed the assurance from DFP that the headroom in both Departments will be monitored to ensure that allocations are used only for the agreed purposes. Given that scrutiny process and the assurances received, the Committee was, therefore, content to grant accelerated passage to the Bill.

As to the residual issues to be addressed in the weeks ahead, the Committee reiterates the importance of Departments minimising year-end underspend to ensure that the Executive keep within the limits of the Budget exchange scheme agreed with the Treasury. In his

statement to the Assembly on 22 January 2013, the Minister advised that:

"The Executive are carrying forward a considerable overcommitment on the resource DEL side. That should ensure that our block-level underspend at the provisional out-turn stage will not exceed the Budget exchange scheme limit" — [Official Report, Vol 81, No 2, p23, col 2].

Given the financial and economic challenges facing the Executive, it is vital that the moneys are not lost to Northern Ireland and returned to the Treasury through year-end underspend exceeding the limits of 0.6% of resource departmental expenditure limit (DEL) and 1.5% of capital DEL — figures which exclude the Department of Justice, which has separate end-of-year flexibility arrangements.

In his statement on 22 January, the Minister advised that the actual amounts of those percentage limits:

"will be finalised and agreed with ... Treasury in the coming weeks, but they are likely to be around £50 million of resource DEL and £14 million of capital DEL." — [Official Report, Vol 81, No 2, P20, col 1].

Perhaps the Minister will provide an update on the precise figures later in this debate.

Also on that issue, I reiterate the recommendation that all the statutory Committees closely monitor the forecasting and expenditure of their respective Departments during the remainder of this financial year — and, indeed, over the next financial year — in order to ensure that underspend is minimised and that Departments maximise the impact from available resources. Full and timely engagement by Departments with their respective Committees is crucial in ensuring that all statutory Committees can fulfil their important advisory and scrutiny functions in that area.

A further residual issue that the Finance Committee continues to examine is the question of the £18 million of European Union funding relating to the Titanic signature project. That was discussed by the Committee during its evidence session with DFP officials on the January monitoring round. More recently, during the Second Stage debate on the Bill, on Tuesday 12 February, the Minister assured the House that:

"The only time frame is that Europe requires that the money be spent within the next two years. So, the time frame is about finding the projects that are available that can spend the £18 million before 2015, and there are plenty of such projects".

He went on to explain that:

"What we simply do is use European money to fund those projects and take £18 million from them and make it available to DETI." — [Official Report, Vol 82, No 2, p51, col 2].

The Committee has received some initial clarification from DFP on the role played and advice provided by the Central Procurement Directorate in the procurement process for the project. The correspondence from the Department also indicated that DFP is working with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) on a range of potential projects which may be suitable to attract the £18 million in EU funding. Following consideration of that correspondence at their meeting last week, members agreed to request a private briefing from the applicable departmental officials to examine the issues, including the options for ensuring that Northern Ireland does not lose the £18 million in EU funding.

During the oral evidence from DFP officials on the Bill, the Committee also queried the impact of the Titanic signature project issue on the DETI spring Supplementary Estimates. On that technical point, the departmental officials informed the Committee that the spring Supplementary Estimates for DETI could be subject to change if the First Minister and deputy First Minister approve spending for the Titanic signature project. Any resultant increase in the DETI departmental expenditure limit on its reconciliation page will be updated accordingly as an addendum.

However, it was also explained that, if the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) endorses the allocation of £18 million to DETI, it will not appear in the DETI Estimate, but it will instead score in the Tourist Board accounts as a non-departmental public body. That is because, under current arrangements, Estimates reflect only the cash grant paid by sponsoring Departments to their non-departmental public bodies and not the full resource consumption. On that point, DFP officials explained that the review of the financial process aims to resolve the issue of aligning budgets, Estimates and accounts and thereby increase transparency.

During the evidence session on 30 January, DFP officials indicated that work was ongoing to progress the review, including discussions with counterparts in other Departments to find some way in which ministerial autonomy could be protected, so that Ministers have discretion to move resources around as they want to, but, at the same time, the Assembly is provided with an insight into where the resources are going. Perhaps the Minister can also update the House on that issue later in today's debate.

The two residual issues that I highlighted will, no doubt, be the subject of further consideration at a later date. For today, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister and congratulate him for bringing this forward today. I do not want to redden his face, but he does a wonderful job. Self-praise is no recommendation, but I am giving it to him anyway.

Agreeing the Budget Bill today will allow us to agree this year's 2012-13 spend and the spend for the first part of 2013-14 until we approve everything in June, hopefully.

In the monitoring rounds, Departments brought forward a commitment with regard to redeeming funds at as early a stage as possible so that they are not lost. Up to now for this year, things are working better. Historically, moneys have had to go back to Westminster because they were not spent. However, that is not the case. I know that the media like to jump all over the block grant that we receive and the moneys that we spend and do not spend. Parameters have been set down about how much we can or cannot carry forward, and it is good budgeting to ensure that that happens.

The Minister talked about ensuring that all work is carried out between now and the end of this financial year. Some Departments will definitely have difficulty in reaching some of those targets, but let us hope and pray that they do.

There was a problem with regard to Departments' interpretation of efficiency plans. Some arm's-length bodies and some Departments have different impressions of efficiencies, and work needs to be done to ensure that everyone is singing from the same hymn sheet. Departments' forecasts and expenditure was an area that we focused on greatly. The Committee wants to ensure that those forecasts are realistic and can be met through the expenditure over the next year and are not crystal-ball gazing. We have had to deal with some Departments having an

overcommitment on their resource. So I appreciate that.

We support the motion. I was happy that the Committee agreed to accelerated passage and that we did not have the same debacle as last year, which created some difficulty, but we got there eventually. It had the potential for Departments to spend without that spending being formally agreed through the House. I support Final Stage and look forward to ensuring that, come June, we take the same approach to the Final Stage of the Budget Bill for 2013-14.

1.45 pm

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The discussions that we had in the earlier consideration of the Bill covered all the bases. The systems that we have developed are working quite effectively and are being worked effectively. We had an early focus on more accurate, more rigorous financial projection and set performance targets against that. I think that that has had the desired effect and that we manage the overall Budget in a much more satisfactory way. There will always be exceptions and circumstances that cannot be anticipated, but the flexibility of monitoring rounds allows us to adjust.

I echo Paul's comments about efficiency savings. Some Departments have genuinely found efficiencies, but it has been a patchy performance. The same focus that we previously put on financial projections and performance needs to be addressed to this issue because that will be an ongoing requirement as pressure on the block grant continues. On that basis, and just to join in, I commend the Minister on the motion and on the work done so far.

Mr Cree: It is nice to be able to support the Final Stage of the Budget Bill here this afternoon. As you know, the Bill provides a statutory authority for expenditure in 2012-13. I was talking to Mr Girvan in the Lobby, and I am just wondering whether he was reading my speech or has a very good memory, but he seemed to cover the same points, as, indeed, did Mitchel. It is probably a good thing that everyone in the Committee is singing from the same hymn sheet, and I have to say that it is an unusual occurrence.

Two weeks ago, we approved the spring Supplementary Estimates. They cover the monitoring rounds and the Vote on Account, which permits public expenditure in the early

part of the next financial year. The Main Estimates for 2013-14 will be considered and decided by the Assembly in June. We will then enter year 3 of the four-year mandate, and, as I have said before, it is crucial that the Executive ensure that all Departments engage fully with their respective Committees by providing adequate information in time for scrutiny. The review of the financial process was intended to provide clarity in order to make such engagement meaningful. Does the Minister expect the Executive to agree and implement the improvements in time for the Main Estimates later in the year?

The current system is ineffective and does not show transparency or direct read-across. Moreover, Ministers must make every effort to ensure that departmental budgets are adhered to and underspend kept to an absolute minimum. We have to avoid the risk of having to return any unspent funding to the Treasury. The Minister said last year that such an occurrence would be extremely difficult to explain to taxpayers as we work through one of the tightest Budgets in recent years. It remains so. Increasing overcommitment to protect inadequate spending is just not good enough, and I support the Minister in his stand to improve accountability.

Last year, we were advised that some 1,400 new starts in the social housing sector had been provided. It would be good to know the situation today. Taxpayers need to know the actual results being achieved and what progress is being made over and above the provision of routine public services.

Another concern that I have is that Departments may well have failed to make the efficiency savings that they announced. I noticed that the Deputy Chairman referred to that. The Minister is well aware of the Audit Office report, and I would appreciate any comments that he is able to make on the situation and on how it will have a direct effect on the Budget figures.

We need to up our game and illustrate delivery during the remaining two years. The Estimates in June will be a critical time in defining the success or otherwise of this Government. We will be judged on that.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Bill's Final Stage debate. Although it has been said that the Budget was not all that we would have hoped for, economic reality necessitates that we do all that we can to maximise public expenditure, prevent underspend and strive to rebalance and restructure the local economy.

Most of the other Committee members covered all the technicalities of the Budget process, so I will not repeat those and will keep my comments brief. However, I know that the Minister would feel short-changed if I did not mention that the ongoing costs of managing a divided society are unsustainable.

In his opening remarks, the Minister highlighted some of the successes in tourism etc. Maybe I need to take the opportunity as well to tell him at this stage how wonderful he is. In the face of good news stories, however, the recent unrest has shown that, when we scratch the surface, the divisions are still very evident. There is no doubt that such divisions will continue to hurt us economically and financially by deterring tourism and investment, as well as by limiting our ability to attract and maintain top talent.

So, although I offer my support to the Bill, the question still stands: how much longer can the Assembly afford to continue spending money on managing division rather than finding sustainable solutions to remove it?

Mr McNarry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Not wishing to be a party pooper, I want to go on record to say that I actually like Sammy Wilson quite well. However, I will speak in opposition to the Budget Bill. It is my intention to present my case and to be afforded, as I would expect, a fair and uninterrupted hearing. That is an entitlement that, I know, you allow each Member to legitimately claim in the House.

The Minister called for Members to adhere closely to the nuances of the Bill, and he presented to us the accelerated passage of the Bill to ensure the continuity of public services into 2013-14. Although the Finance Minister did a good job of presenting the Budget, the Budget that he had to deliver was a complacent Budget that was agreed by a complacent Executive and presented to a complacent Assembly.

In no short measure, however, I exonerate the Minister, who is, after all, someone who has to present the Budget, which the Executive agreed behind closed doors. He has carried out his duty professionally. I considered tabling amendments, but what is the point? This Budget is, and was, a done deal before the Minister presented it to the House. In fact, the House must share my thoughts, because no party tabled any amendments.

The purpose of the Bill is to authorise the use by Departments and certain other bodies of resources totalling over £16 billion. Current and capital receipts of over £2 billion contribute to an overall operating total of just under £19

billion. The Finance Minister, in his usual style of combining a jolly approach on the one hand with schoolteacher scolding on the other, has been the only Minister to present during the Budget debate. His job was to act as the delegated Minister who was tasked with the job of presenting the Budget carve-up that was agreed at the Executive table.

It seems that no other Minister felt it necessary, or was present, to defend their departmental spend, despite the universal criticism of all Departments by their respective Committees. The House alone and not a Committee is tasked with endorsing this Budget Bill, and not one Department that was mentioned escaped criticism, yet only one Minister — quite properly, the Finance Minister — appeared in the Assembly to first, listen and then to explain the Budget on behalf of absentee Ministers. I am not so sure that, to date, he has defended the Ministers' case for them, in which case I suggest that on future Budget occasions all Ministers should be present to defend their Department's policies and make their own compelling arguments for funding. Their separate cases have clearly convinced the Finance Minister yet again, but how revealing it would be for the House to have heard the merits of the arguments that persuaded Mr Wilson to present the Budget Bill for them.

Let me take them in order: the Department of Justice; the Health Department; the Department of Education; the Department for Regional Development; the Department for Social Development; the Agriculture Department; the Department of the Environment; the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; the Department for Employment and Learning; and the Culture Department. All those Departments have high-spending Ministers. Each of those Departments is taking the Assembly on a route map of policies determined by individual party political agendas.

Take the education budget. Is the House agreed to the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) empire being funded? In the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), is this Budget a rush towards blank-cheque handouts to Translink? Even though a serious Committee inquiry is taking place, are we content to fund Translink performances? Are we agreeing to a major road spend in the west, still mired in court cases? That spend is locked into this Budget.

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

In health, is the House making itself complicit in playing the almighty distributor of priorities in that, the most sensitive of all complex Departments, where funding has simply become a lottery? In environment, are we funding a budget for a wind farm policy, a retail development policy and a Belfast versus the rest policy, and agreeing to the Budget funding an over-expensive super-council structure? When we look at the Budget presented, we see that you are all agreeing to those policies. You are giving powers of attorney to Ministers to fund their own political agendas. Of course, that has to be one of the joys of operating a mandatory coalition.

Mr D Bradley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNarry: Just a minute.

The Assembly, caught in a mood of complacency, is allowing a party political carve-up at the Executive table, where the shopping list of largely party political fiefdoms is divvied up. We have cantonised government here. We have a Government of self-interested, party political shopping lists, rather than a Government of true coalition, presenting ideas and even solutions. That is, I contend, no way to run Northern Ireland during the greatest economic crisis in 80 years.

Look at the budgetary requirements borne out of party political projects and not out of addressing the needs of our economy and our people. You would almost think that austerity had not arrived in Northern Ireland. You could even be forgiven for thinking that austerity is over, when, in fact, no proper balancing of the books has even started. You would think that vulnerable people do not exist in Northern Ireland. However, the truth is that they do exist and are being ignored by a complacent and disconnected Executive preoccupied with their own party political interests and judged by the public, so far, to be smug with it.

How difficult can it be to spend a block grant? However, our Departments routinely return unspent money. That implies that the Departments do not know how to manage money; that they are full of wish lists and pie-in-the-sky projects. When push came to shove, they ran for cover by reneging on their fantasy bids. Tell me this: where do those projects come from? Who dreams them up? Who is conjuring up those spending follies? Are civil servants driving Ministers into a silo mentality of budgetary idealism and over-optimism?

2.00 pm

Having watched Departments return loads of unspent money, I suppose I can now concede that Sammy Wilson was right in saying that contingencies have proved to be unnecessary in our system. So much money is returned unspent that he has the surpluses to tinker, enabling him to readjust the financial allocation between Departments as the year progresses. So, with that departmental mentality, why would Mr Wilson need a contingency to fall back on? The terrible truth is that there is not joined-up government; there is no plan to get us out of the economic crisis; there is no driving energy or vision for government. The whole operation oozes with complacency and a lack of drive and imagination.

Why, when we make a decision to reduce the number of Departments, is the Department for Employment and Learning still there? Seemingly, it is being budgeted for and, seemingly, it has been politically bought and paid for. How many more squalid, self-interested, back-door compromises have to be made before we get a properly accountable system of government that can be properly measured against performance? The compromise that this Budget represents is characterised only by inaction and complacency. It is a situation that led one Committee Chairman to tell senior departmental officials to their face that their performance in front of the Committee was pathetic. Indeed.

However, in the Second Stage debate, one Member, who usually has something sensible to say on budgets, referred to the missed opportunities of this Budget. He said that it was at the strategic level that we are being challenged and that the time had come to at least begin to discuss that strategic level. He is right.

Take the Department of Education. Are we continuing to back ESA? Even though that body has yet to be fully established, we have thrown money, like confetti, at its building-block creation. It seems that it is primed to become an education empire, ready to receive more funding than the House intends. Certainly gone is the argument that ESA would be a self-sustaining body that would be financed on the basis of it being a slim, more efficient authority, and, thus, we were told, one that would, effectively, deliver savings. Savings through expenditure reductions are, it seems, no longer mentioned in the debate.

Are we budgeting for an ESA monster with a voracious appetite for eating up money? Does that budgeting also allow for the appalling policy decision to ignore, keep out or even permit

associate representation on the ESA board for the voluntary grammar schools? In fact, are we supporting a budget to finance ESA, which, in effect, will do all it can to outlaw grammar schools?

A budget should be founded on integrity and not on expediency. These so-called agreed measures for implementation that are reflected in the Budget represent to me one hell of a compromise and a vacuum where principle should have stood. That compromise needs some explaining, because the Budget is the outworking of all the backstairs deals and all the agreed measures of this five-party mandatory coalition. This Budget will set in stone the priorities of that mandatory coalition, and, by supporting them, we are passing on those squalid deals on the nod.

Compiling the mandatory coalition Budget has not relieved the complexities brought to the table in distributing the spending figure that was put into our circle of administration. That is why the Budget enshrines missed opportunities and is oozing complacency in its carve-up.

Previously, the Finance Minister and I have often clashed. Well, perhaps, we have not clashed. Let me say that we have exchanged a difference of views over the meaning of the term "contingency". When I wanted to emphasise the need for contingencies, he politely declined by saying that, under his watch, contingencies were unnecessary. What do we do, however, when cavalier attitudes prevail in Departments and are, then, calculated into their budgets? At least, could we not expect to see Ministers being disciplined in a preventative way in future, in order to prevent both them and us looking foolish and incompetent? Is that, in itself, not a contingency worth implementing?

Expectations of the Budget exist out there. There is pressure for solutions and some panacea for the economic crisis that we are in. Nevertheless, this Budget and, I suspect, Budgets that are yet to come can never fully meet all that is expected of them. This Budget, however, fails to bring relief to those who are most in need. That is required to be addressed. Unfortunately, this Budget is not designed to do so. It needs to be reconstructed. New urgencies are developing rapidly. We have a duty to consider what scope, if any, exists to meet those new situations. We must exchange our present rigidity for flexibility.

In essence, what scope has this Budget to deal with certain particular problems that are not going away and are likely to be with us for

some years ahead? I have to say that there is a persistent reluctance and unwillingness to reshape how we manage public spending to better meet the demands and needs of the economy and society. These budgetary measures are unacceptably remote from today's people, today's needs. We need a Budget that can help to offset the real pain and suffering that impacts directly on people. They will see very little in this Budget for them. There is scant recognition of their everyday requirement to adequately fuel growth, jobs and productivity. We must give people dignity along with a deserved quality of life.

Sixty thousand adults are out of work for a year or more. One-hundred thousand children are caught up in poverty. Thousands are rendered inactive and unable to find employment due to poor qualifications and limited skills. Increased numbers of children are leaving primary schools with severe literacy and numeracy deficiencies. More family homes than ever are being repossessed. Those are the real issues about which no one should feel complacent. I challenge any Minister in any Department to show the public how their use of their budget will impact directly on making life better for any person who is out of work; in poverty; lacking in skills and qualifications; unable to spell, read, write or count; or is caught in negative equity but is unable to keep up their mortgage payments.

That is not to mention the growing number of people who are fully engaged in work but are, nevertheless, struggling to raise a family or enjoy plans for their retirement. During these Budget Bill Stages, I have listened to some Members — and I have heard it today — open their speeches with a rant, interspersed with a whinge, and close them with a Budget validation and a whimper of, "I do" or, "I will support the Budget." That is not good enough.

A recent comment by Lynda Wilson, on behalf of Barnardo's, caught my attention. She said that people are asking for politicians to wrap policies around investment. We should pay attention to that.

I am mindful that the Minister will have the last word in this debate. I am sure that it will be very enjoyable. He may be tired or buoyant or in a combative mood, but he specifically requested that Members adhere closely to the nuances of the Bill. It is those shades of meaning and open interpretation that I have sought to address. I caution against ignoring what is being said. I respectfully suggest that my opinion is shared by many in the House and, more importantly, many outside. There is

a growing consensus that there are underlying problems in this set-up. It is not expressed openly in this debate because the Whips have done their job and organised the cheerleading. Nevertheless, there is a growing consensus that there are underlying problems in this political set-up.

The Bill should be part of rectifying the recurrent failure to address complacent departmental management. It should, but it is not. Today, I am not interested in a battle of wits and a one-day-wonder debate, or a Budget Bill that is a one-trick pony. The problem of complacency has been identified, so what can be done? I sense that the House would be agreeable to and interested in a debate that concentrates on really delivering for public expectations and meeting public need, perhaps by using a weighted score on departmental performances.

Earlier, I referred to a Member's view that it was at the strategic level that we were being challenged. That Member went on to ask whether we can develop synergies, find more traction, develop new strategies and see more analysis of why investments did not occur or why they were relocated. He concluded with what I consider to be a wry comment: if we are to continue with the same inputs, we will, unfortunately, continue to get the same outputs. His well-made point helps me to rest my case for an opposing view on the Budget.

Mr Wilson: I thank Members who took part in this short Final Stage of the Budget debate. I emphasise that it is the Final Stage. Maybe the Member who spoke previously should have borne in mind that there have been many opportunities to speak in the House over the past couple of weeks for those who take the view that, somehow or other, there are fundamental flaws in this Budget. The Member believes that that view is shared by many in the House. I am sure that, had he made a cogent case, and, much more importantly, put down some amendments, that untapped source of discontent may have been able to find some expression. I will deal with Mr McNarry's speech later, but, at the very outset, I want to say that a process has been gone through.

The framework for a four-year Budget was laid down in the debates. They took place in the Assembly, and everyone had an opportunity to take part in them. Members also took part in Committees. Ministers had the chance to make their bids. They made those at the Executive; some of them made them publicly in the Assembly. Some made them to their Committees or got their Committees to lobby,

and there were substantial lobby groups across Northern Ireland. That set the basis for the four-year Budget, which we are now going through year by year. Of course, there have been changes to it, and that is why we are having this debate. People could not spend money on some of the things they had intended to spend it on; therefore, the money was reallocated. Of course, we also reviewed the Budget, looking at the trends in in-year reduced requirements and whether that meant that budgets should be reviewed in some way.

2.15 pm

Let me quickly go through some of the points that were made in the debate. The Deputy Chairman of the Committee accepted that there had been consultation, and I appreciate the work that the Committee did with my officials and the fact that, having done that work, it was happy for the Budget Bill to go through by accelerated passage. Of course, that did not mean that there were not opportunities for people to express views on the Bill in the House. Indeed, they did so in quite a long Budget debate earlier this month.

I think that the Deputy Chair made a very important point about the flexibilities that already exist for Ministers. He talked about the technical changes that were undertaken by Ministers after Committee scrutiny. One of the things that bemuses me a little is that there was opposition to the financial process arrangements, which would have introduced some changes. Some Ministers objected on the basis that they did not give them enough flexibility. The Deputy Chairman of the Committee got it right: there needs to be flexibility. Indeed, there is substantial flexibility, whether in the de minimis changes that Ministers can make or the retrospectively ratified larger changes that they can make through proactive management and moving money around. In-year bids also give flexibility.

At the same time — this is the other side, and I thought that the Deputy Chairman explained the balance really well — we must make sure that money is spent on the purposes for which it was voted. Therefore, you cannot and should not give carte blanche to Ministers so that, once they get a pot of money, they can simply say, "Let us do whatever we want with it". It is about making sure that you do not tie people's hands and say that every penny must be spent in the way that it was voted — things change, as Mr Bradley pointed out — while, on the other hand, ensuring that the views of the Assembly are not overridden by Ministers who simply say that

they have carte blanche and can do whatever they want.

Mr Bradley also raised the issue of the overcommitment, and I can confirm to him that his figures are correct. Obviously, the final figure depends on whatever allocations are made during the year because it is a percentage of our total Budget, but the figures that he gave are, by and large, the correct ones.

Mr Girvan has gone, but I thank him for the fulsome praise that he gave me. It is just a pity that the First Minister was not around to hear it. Anyway, that does not matter. Mr Girvan, Mr McLaughlin and Mr Cree talked about the importance of efficiency plans that Departments had to see through — it was a central theme. I would just make one point on that. Efficiency plans are important, and we set the efficiency levels that Departments have to achieve every year, but it is not for me or my Department to micromanage Departments and tell them that efficiencies have to be achieved by their doing this, this and this. That is up to individual Ministers.

It is then up to Committees to scrutinise that the efficiencies delivered were not at the expense of front line services or, at least, that front line services have not had their provision cut without efficiencies first being delivered in those parts of the Department that do not affect or impact on the public. That is why the monitoring of efficiency plans by Committees is important. It is a pity, and I have made this point time and again, that the Education Minister is the only Minister who is not prepared to engage in that exchange with Committees.

Judith Cochrane raised the issue of tourism and the impact on it of the current flags dispute, which her party unfortunately generated.

Mr McCarthy: No way.

Mr Wilson: Well —

Mr McCarthy: No way, Sammy. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Wilson: — there is no point in the Member saying, from a sedentary position, "No way; do not blame us.". As far as I and the public are aware, and the record shows it, the vote and the decision on the removal of the flag of our country from Belfast City Hall depended on the votes that the Alliance Party gave in support of Sinn Féin and the SDLP. Of course, that kicked

off a whole raft of disorder across Northern Ireland.

Let me make quite clear something that I have said time and time again so am quite happy to repeat: I do not support what has happened as a result of it. I cannot understand why people who value their British heritage and the country in which they live would want to destroy it in that way. Equally, however, I think that those who sparked the reaction cannot run away from the responsibility that they bear for this and then condemn the impact that it is likely to have on our economy.

I really do not know where to start with Mr McNarry's contribution, other than to say that, if he really felt as genuinely and as hard as he said that he does about this Budget, he might have wanted to say all that at a stage when he could do something about it. I suspect that he raised all his objections at this stage because he knew that he could do so secure in the knowledge that nothing could be required of him, other than to engage in a bit of rhetoric. That is basically what it was.

I noticed that he asked what we should then do. I thought, right; I am going to get some really good ideas that I can take to the Executive, and when we review under monitoring rounds the amount of money, or when we start to work on the next Budget, Mr McNarry will have supplied me with great ammunition to take to my Executive colleagues. So, what did we get? He said that we need synergies, traction and strategies — I do not know what all that means. He talked about the unemployed, the poor, the disadvantaged, the need to stimulate the economy and to change direction. Since he mentioned specific problems, I thought that we might have got some specific actions to match them rather than simply a lot of management jargon about synergies, tractions, strategies and Lord knows what else.

However, let us just look at some of the stuff that he said. I am actually glad that somebody said something or at least made some comments about this Budget that I could get my teeth into. He talked about the complacency in the Assembly. We "ooze" complacency. That means all of us — all the parties. Some party Members had been whipped like curs into submission, and others simply could not be bothered anyway. That is except for McNarry, who happened to miss making any contribution in the main Budget debate and who forgot to table any amendments during Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage but got himself out of his complacency and rose from his place for the Final Stage debate on the

Budget, even though he could not do anything about it by then. Nevertheless, the whole Assembly is, apparently, "oozing" complacency. I would have thought that, had he wanted to be proactive, he would have brought some things through.

Secondly, he asked why all the Ministers were not present to give their case. I cannot understand that. Does he not know how we go about doing Budgets? There is not a country in the world where all the Ministers come and make their case when a final Budget is being presented. It is a bit late at that stage. You can imagine, in that case, George Osborne standing up in a couple of weeks' time in the House of Commons with the Budget for next year and Ministers coming in and saying, "By the way, I want this for DEFRA" and "I want this for BIS.". What way would that be to conduct a Budget debate? We use a very reasonable mechanism, where all the bids from different Departments are weighed up and balanced, and then decisions are made about the pot of resources that we have and the way in which that money should be allocated. Then, of course, once we have decided on those allocations, the Assembly will have the final say on the Budget. Ministers are not present not because they are hiding but simply because it would not be a sensible way of dealing with the construction of a Budget.

He then talked about unspent money and fantasy bids. He asked where those projects come from. Again, he knows enough about monitoring rounds. Let us look at some of the moneys that were returned. The Department of Education returned some money because it took money for schools that had saved money and that may have wanted to use it during the year. Those schools decided that they did not want to use the money and therefore gave it back. I could perhaps criticise the Minister and ask why he did not find that out sooner from the schools, but the truth of the matter is that if the schools decided not to spend their own money, you cannot force them to do so. If they have put that into savings from previous years' budgets and decided that it will be better used next year because next year they are going to paint the school, redo the computer suite, or whatever, that is up to those schools to decide. I could go through lots of other things. Those are not fantasy bids that were picked out of mid-air and never followed through on.

He then asked what we do and said that we tinkered with the surpluses. When Stephen Farry makes bids, and we put £13 million into training young people who have no skills or people who we know already have skills but

need retraining, that is not tinkering with the Budget. Indeed, using the Member's own criteria, that is good use of the Budget. When I give money to Nelson McCausland for people to get their foot on the first rung of the property ladder, through co-ownership or whatever, that is not tinkering. That is addressing a real problem that we have. That is what the Budget Bill contains. It reflects the changes that we have made.

If you look at the way in which we have allocated money in the Budget, you will see the priority given to growing the economy. He talks about the 60,000 people who are unemployed, and, yes, there are more people unemployed in Northern Ireland than we want to see. However, our average unemployment rate is now the same as the average unemployment rate for the United Kingdom as a whole. It is well below what it is in the Irish Republic, in most other European countries and in six other regions of the United Kingdom. Even though we are on the periphery of the United Kingdom and tend to suffer greater economic disadvantage, through some of the policies that we have used, we have kept unemployment lower than it would normally be at this stage of the cycle in a recession.

We have also addressed the issue of people living in poverty. Whether through the rates changes that we have made or through some of the things that we are doing through the social investment fund, the social protection fund, etc, we have addressed those particular issues. Of course, we have had to do it from within a Budget that is available to us from the United Kingdom Government. Therefore, I reject the superficial criticisms made at this late stage by Mr McNarry, and I commend the Bill to the Assembly, because I do not want to speak again after Question Time on this particular issue. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that, as this is the Budget Bill, cross-community support is required.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget Bill [NIA 18/11-15] do now pass.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Creative Industries Innovation Fund

1. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how many projects have been supported through the creative industries innovation fund. (AQO 3456/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for his question. With his indulgence, I want to begin by congratulating Seamus McGarvey, the Armagh cinematographer who was nominated again for an Oscar — unfortunately, he did not get it — for the film 'Anna Karenina'.

The creative industries innovation fund (CIF) originally ran between 2008 and 2011 and supported 156 projects. The fund was relaunched in July 2011 and has a Programme for Government target of supporting 200 projects by 2015. At this midway point, 98 projects have been supported so far. The most recent call for projects closed earlier this month, and the applications that were received are now being assessed.

The fund stimulates the development of commercially viable products and services that are capable of competing in global markets and makes an important contribution to growing our creative industries. I am confident that the Programme for Government target will be achieved.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for her response. I welcome the great detail that the Minister has outlined. Will she assure us that the Programme for Government targets that she referred to will be met across the board, that there will be no regional disparity and that all areas will have the opportunity to excel in what we know is an excellent industry — the creative industries?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The two main areas that have benefited most from the fund have been Belfast and Derry. As a representative of Derry, the Member will know that it is good that the fund and the potential around it will certainly target areas that have experienced high multiple deprivation. However, there are regional disparities, and, again, that is down to

local government coming forward with options to have creative industries innovation funding in their area. I am sure that others will ask at another date. I am keen for officials, wherever possible, to encourage local government representatives to make sure that their area has the same opportunities as many others.

Miss M McIlveen: Obviously, I welcome the CIF funding and the good work that it is producing. Does the Minister have any plans to expand the scope of the fund?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do have plans. Were more funds to be made available, I would certainly expand the funding. I am waiting, in particular, for the Committee's report on the creative industries. I anticipate that there will be good, positive suggestions in that report that may not be included in the current complexion of the fund, but I would certainly like to adopt them into the framework.

It is better to have a joined-up approach. There is no point in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure having an approach and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment having an approach and then the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure making good recommendations that neither of those Departments takes account of. I look forward to that report. If there is a need to bid for additional moneys on that basis, I will certainly do so.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers, and, of course, I welcome any funding. Does she realise, however, that it is the creative industries that will be the future of our design and the creation of architects and others that will bring jobs? I wonder what other priorities have gone ahead of those, because this is the very source of jobs in the future.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not put any priorities ahead of the creative industries fund in terms of what the funding was intended for. This is a good news story: not only has the fund met its targets midway through, but it looks as if it will probably exceed its 2015 Programme for Government target.

The Member is right: it represents something like 4.1% of the workforce, and well over 30,000 people work in creative industries. The school curricula and those of further and higher education encourage more diversity in the creative industries. You only have to look at, for example, the 'Game of Thrones' set, where people who were involved in traditional employment such as carpentry and electrical

engineering are now involved in set design. There is certainly a lot of potential there, and that is something that I am very mindful of.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should have advised Members that questions 3 and 11 have been withdrawn. As Mickey Brady is not in his place to ask question 2, I call Joe Byrne.

World Police and Fire Games: Opening Ceremony

4. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when she will announce the venue for the opening ceremony of the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3459/11-15)

5. **Ms Brown** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on possible venues for the opening and closing ceremonies of the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3460/11-15)

13. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the venue for the opening ceremony of the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3468/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 4, 5 and 13 together.

Fifteen venues were scored against a comprehensive set of criteria to identify the most suitable venue to host the opening ceremony. This process identified a preferred option and contingency options for consideration by the World Police and Fire Games board. The board considered the options at its meeting on 20 February. The venue selected for the opening ceremony is the King's Hall in Belfast. It is an excellent venue that has extensive experience of hosting major events. It will be a great site for the opening showcase of the games. The closing ceremony venue is planned to be the Titanic Slipways. Both the venue sites have been agreed with the World Police and Fire Games Federation.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. It is good that the venue has now been settled. Have all the venues that will stage games during the World Police and Fire Games been sorted out?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, all the venues have been settled. There are 41 sports and 57 venues. Not all of those are in Belfast; something like 15

are outside. Everything that was in place remains. The hiccup was with the opening ceremony, but everything else is sorted out.

Ms Brown: I also welcome the selection of the King's Hall complex especially given its historical significance in Belfast. How will the venue be modified to accommodate the opening ceremony? What is the anticipated capacity?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The federation visited several times between April and July. On its last visit, it was stated that the capacity would be 21,000-plus. The King's Hall can reach that number and more and can even retract to receive smaller numbers if appropriate, although that is not envisaged at this stage. The figures anticipated last week are still expected to come here from 1 to 10 August. The King's Hall is more than able to cope with the opening ceremony.

Mr Humphrey: You said that there were 41 sports and 57 venues. What are the anticipated numbers of athletes and people coming to watch the World Police and Fire Games in Belfast?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have no figures for how many spectators there will be. There are 10,000 athletes, and it is expected that 15,000 people will accompany them. So, that is up to 25,000. There will be a big local interest, particularly in some of the events. The World Police and Fire Games company is looking at ticketing regimes to make sure that members of the public, particularly schools, have every opportunity to attend the events. Some schools here will be paired with countries that are visiting and competing. I have no figure — not even an indication — for the demand yet, but I expect to have that closer to the time.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that this will be an excellent opportunity to showcase Northern Ireland at its best? There will be so many people coming from all parts of the world. It will be an opportunity to let people see that we have a shared heritage and are promoting a shared and better future for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with the Member. It is not just that. Some of the World Police and Fire Games delegates from five different countries, who were here four or five weeks ago, visited some of our historic sites, tourist attractions and communities. They were nothing but impressed with what we have to offer. That was just a

glimpse of what is to come from the start of August.

Tourism: County Londonderry

6. **Mr Campbell** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, following the recent commemoration of the 400th anniversary of The Honourable The Irish Society at the Guildhall, London, what plans she has to promote cultural tourism throughout County Londonderry. (AQO 3461/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure plays a central role in cultural tourism in the North through investment in cultural infrastructure such as museums, theatres, sports venues and the City of Culture. In July, a major classical music production will be hosted in Derry to mark the 400th anniversary of the building of the city's walls. The production is a collaboration between the Culture Company and The Honourable The Irish Society. It will be performed simultaneously in the London Guildhall and Derry's Guildhall by the London Symphony Orchestra and Camerata Ireland.

My Department's arm's-length bodies also contribute to promoting cultural tourism through the provision of facilities, ongoing support for cultural services and building partnerships and funding projects to attract visitors, such as the genealogy events and exhibitions that are planned.

Mr Campbell: The Minister outlined a number of events. She will, I am sure, be aware of the success of the event mentioned in the original question at the Guildhall in London last month. Does she agree that the key now is to ensure that all the events that she mentioned and others throughout the city and county of Londonderry need to be effectively marketed to ensure that they are a success?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I totally agree. It is rare for me to totally agree with Gregory Campbell, but I do. They need to be effectively marketed, and they need to be promoted in the community to ensure that everybody has an opportunity to avail themselves of what will be an outstanding opportunity.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she outline some of the other celebrations that will take place as part of Derry's year of culture? Will she also give us some indication of whether there should

be an effective marketing plan and finance from the Tourist Board?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The programme has well over 140 events. In relation to celebrating the building of Derry's walls, there are a few other events around history that we could consider alongside new and existing events that are shaped around the story of the walls. The city will play host to a number of events, such as Graffiti Jam, formerly the Walled City Carnival. The Maiden City Festival takes place in and around the walls as part of the build-up to the Apprentice Boys of Derry Association event. The Verbal Arts Centre will deliver classical musical events about the commissioning of the walls. It is incumbent upon everyone, particularly those with responsibility for promoting tourism, to promote the events in Derry to best effect. Whatever happens in the city of Derry and around the north-west needs to be impacted on by everybody.

Mr Eastwood: In Derry, we have proved that culture can be a good economic driver through cultural tourism. Is much work being done between her Department and DETI to ensure that that good work is capitalised on across the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assure the Member that there is and will continue to be good work. I will make sure that what happens in Derry, particularly this year but also with the legacy, benefits the city. As I have said before and will say time and time again, it is a city that has not seen the investment that it was entitled to for decades. Investment in the City of Culture project by the Executive of over £30 million is a commitment to making sure that the project is very successful not just in 2013 but in the years after that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Michael McGimpsey is not in his place to ask question 7.

World Police and Fire Games

8. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the number of competitors who have registered for the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3463/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As of 21 February, 2,454 competitors had registered for the games. I continue to closely monitor progress on registrations and anticipate the company achieving the target of 10,000 competitors for the games.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome that information. I am not sure how the Minister views that information. Will the cap of 7,500, as anticipated by the Department, be required?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry, I did not pick up the last part of the question.

Mr Hilditch: I was asking about the cap of 7,500 that was put in place.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Everything is in place as it should be. I was concerned some weeks ago that the figure seemed a bit low, but there is constant reassurance from the federation that the figures reflect a typical pattern of behaviour and that, closer to the games, there will be a surge of registrations. The figure includes team registrations, which makes it a bit deceiving. Captains are putting in a registration for their whole team. I want to get that broken down further and have a more accurate figure as the weeks roll on. However, certainly, I am happy at this stage that things are as they should be.

2.45 pm

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister tell us what the current situation is with pop-up accommodation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Pop-up accommodation is still being closely monitored and scrutinised in the event that it is needed by the World Police and Fire Games company. As I have seen, the company is working very closely with the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau and the Tourist Board to look at alternative forms of accommodation. As the Member is aware, under the Tourism Order 1992, tourist accommodation must be certified by the Tourist Board, and DETI has provided advice to the Tourist Board on how alternative accommodation, such as pop-up accommodation, will be facilitated under that order. Certainly, it will have all the facilities that anybody would expect in any other hotel or B&B facility.

Mr Gardiner: Can the Minister give us a guarantee that there will be sufficient accommodation for all competitors and that no one will be turned away because there is nowhere for them to stay?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can guarantee that a robust exercise is taking place, looking not just within Belfast and not just at hotel accommodation.

As my answer to the previous question suggested, the exercise is looking at pop-up or alternative accommodation. We are also looking at B&Bs and guest houses. Some weeks ago, I met some providers and potential providers. I am content that everything that should be done is being done. That is not just for Belfast and the central area but for outlying areas that are no more than half an hour's journey away. Certainly, there will be benefits for surrounding areas such as Lisburn from the World Police and Fire Games. At this stage, I am happy enough that everything will be done to achieve the target.

Arts: Lottery Funding

Mr McCarthy: Ceist uimhir a naoi, Mr Deputy Speaker. Question 9.

9. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for her assessment of the use of lottery money in supplementing her budget for the arts. (AQO 3464/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Maith thú, a Kieran. I thank the Member for his question.

The Arts Council supports a number of programmes through lottery funding. These programmes include the small grants programme, the intercultural arts programme, the arts and older people programme, capital funding, support for the individual artist programme and specific arts project funding, as well as the annual funding programme. I am very pleased with this additional money from the lottery and how it is utilised because these programmes support groups and individuals in accessing and participating in the arts across the North. As the Minister, I place great importance on this work, as it is of particular importance to those who face barriers in accessing and participating in the arts — for example, older people and minority ethnic communities, as well as marginalised and deprived communities.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, Minister. Does the Minister agree that lottery funding should not be used specifically for her Department but should be used only for additional items and not included in departmental calculations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is not. I give the Member that assurance. It is additional money. Lottery money cannot be used to bridge gaps or holes in departmental funding. That is not its purpose. If the Member has any evidence that that is happening, I would be really keen to see

it. Lottery money, like European money, needs to be additional and should not be "instead of". Any additional funding, be it from the lotteries, small trusts or elsewhere, that helps people to access the arts has to be welcomed, as I am sure that the Member agrees.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. What impact did the reduction in lottery funding as a result of the 2012 London Olympics have on the arts across the North?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The Arts Council has estimated that there was a loss of £4.2 million as a result of the diversion of funds to the London Olympics, and, naturally, it feels that that reduced the overall funding available to lottery-assisted programmes. Specific details on the impact of that reduction are not available despite numerous requests. My Department has no evidence to suggest that there has been a significant detrimental impact on the access to and availability of funding for the arts here.

Mr Elliott: Given that, as I understand it, the Olympic organising committee handed money back to the National Lottery, has the Minister or her Department made any attempt to see whether any of that money is available to her Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware of whether that is the case. I will certainly try to find out. That is the first that I have heard that. Since we saw the figure that was available as a result of the London Olympic and Paralympic Games and heard the lobbying and requests from groups here and further afield about the potential impact of the events in London on the arts, we have constantly raised that matter and will continue to raise it. If there is new or additional evidence that money was handed back to the lottery but has not come back into the communities, I will be keen to hear about that and will certainly be happy to raise the issue.

East Belfast Arts Festival

10. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any representations that her Department has received regarding the East Belfast Arts Festival. (AQO 3465/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In 2012, applications for funding for the East Belfast Arts Festival were made to the Arts Council and to Belfast City Council. The application to Belfast City Council was for funding under the community festivals fund, which is match-funded by my Department.

Both applications were unsuccessful. Officials from the Arts Council subsequently met the festival organisers to fully explain the reasons for that decision. They also explained the application process to the organisers to assist them with future applications. The Arts Council provided £5,000 for the 2012 East Belfast Arts Festival in the form of sponsorship. To date, my Department has received no representations in relation to an East Belfast Arts Festival for 2013. I have asked my officials to arrange a meeting with you to discuss any assistance that can be made available to the organisers for the festival.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answer, and I am pleased that she recognises that the east Belfast festival, delivered as it was on a shoestring budget, was a great success. There is an indication from those who organised it that they need a development fund to help to make the festival an even greater success this year than it was last year.

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said in my main answer, I am happy for my officials to meet you, as we have done previously. Given the size of east Belfast and, indeed, the festival's reputation, it merits a visit from officials to see what way we can take it forward, if at all.

Mr Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her replies so far. I may have missed this, and, if I have, I apologise to the Minister. Did the Department give any direct support to the festival? If not, could the Minister explain why, please?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary. As I said in the main answer, it is about the Department providing money through the Arts Council and Belfast City Council through the community festivals fund. Where there are specific requests — maybe the Member for East Belfast is hinting at this — for assistance and support for an overall development plan, which is probably about regeneration, part of which includes arts, we will be happy to look at that and try to support it, where possible. The money for festival programmes is allocated to the Arts Council and to Belfast City Council or local government.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister said that, as yet, there had been no application for 2013. Would she welcome such an application, and would that be based on her assessment of the success of 2012?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member was present when I gave my answer to Robin Newton, who has raised the needs of east Belfast with me continually. I welcome the fact that, as I have heard anecdotally, 2012 and previous years were a success. I am sure that 2013 will be a success as well. If I hear the Member correctly — I do — I have to say that the shoestring budget was a hindrance and, if further funds or support were made available, the festival could be even more successful.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

World Police and Fire Games: West Tyrone

12. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure whether West Tyrone will benefit from the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3467/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The games will bring approximately 25,000 visitors to the North, and it is vital that we use the opportunity to promote and to sell us as a tourist destination. Although there are no games venues in the West Tyrone constituency, Cookstown in Mid Ulster will be the venue for the half-marathon road race. The company has engaged and will continue to engage with all local councils, including those in West Tyrone, to identify opportunities for them to organise or host events related to the games. Those engagements have highlighted opportunities for volunteering, accommodation and local businesses. In addition, a number of informal days have been held for accommodation providers, including local briefings that were held in Omagh and Enniskillen to which persons from County Tyrone were invited.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her response. Can she give us some more detail on what work has been done with the local council in Omagh, the business community and hoteliers, guest house owners and so forth, so that the effects of the games in Belfast will have a more extended effect — far beyond Belfast — as is only right and proper?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The World Police and Fire Games company and, indeed, my officials have met many representatives from local government. Omagh District Council, for example, did not feel that there was an opportunity for it to bid to host events. Cookstown District Council, for example, put in a bid for the half-marathon road race, and the

Member may be aware that 15 of the events and activities that are part of the World Police and Fire Games are being held outside Belfast. Along with Minister Foster, I have met the hoteliers and businesses recently about accommodation. Indeed, we previously met businesses to discuss the potential for the World Police and Fire Games and the City of Culture to increase support for, in particular, local and small businesses. That work will not stop. If there is anything in particular that the Member wishes to bring to my attention about Omagh or West Tyrone, I am happy to hear it.

Mr McDevitt: I declare an interest as someone who has applied to be a volunteer at the games. Can the Minister tell me whether the rumour is true that I will have an awful lot of competition in securing my opportunity to give up some of my time for free?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am afraid that you are, Conall, and I do not think that we are done yet. There was a request for around 3,500 people to give up their time to volunteer. We now have over 6,000 applicants, and that is good. One of the reasons that we extended the deadline for people to volunteer was to attract people from neighbourhood renewal areas, where, on occasions, there have been difficulties, particularly with some of the services. They have applied, and that is from where the bulk has come. It is good news. I hope that the Member is successful in his application, and I look forward to seeing him taking part in some way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that the question is about the benefits for West Tyrone.

Mrs Overend: It has just occurred to me that there are benefits to other constituents, not just from accommodation. Has that occurred to the Minister? Can she outline some of the benefits to some of our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in West Tyrone and Mid Ulster, maybe in catering and other such things?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sure that small businesses and SMEs will compete for contracts, and those contracts have been outlined in detail to most of the SMEs. Strong social clauses will be included, so there will be an element of legacy well after the World Police and Fire Games finish. As the Member will know, the games will be hosted in Belfast. Belfast City Council bid for the games and won. We are trying to ensure that the benefits from the games go beyond Belfast and help tourism, SMEs,

accommodation, catering, entertainment in local pubs and clubs and even the creative industries. We are looking to see what opportunities there are and what we can develop for August. Everything that can be done is being done.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 13 has already been answered.

Libraries

14. **Mr McNarry** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her vision for the future development of the library service as a community resource across Northern Ireland. (AQO 3469/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department's vision for the public library service is set out in the 'Delivering Tomorrow's Libraries' policy document, which requires:

"A flexible and responsive library service which provides a dynamic focal point in the community and assists people to fulfil their potential."

That means a library service that reaches out, forms partnerships and finds new ways of becoming relevant to the communities. When libraries do that, they place themselves at the heart of communities. I am sure that the Member will agree that that is the best place for our libraries to be.

3.00 pm

Environment

Local Government Reform: Finance

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he submitted a bid for £39.5 million to the Department of Finance and Personnel to help finance the reform of local government. (AQO 3471/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank the Member for his question. I can confirm that I made an argument to the Executive over a number of monitoring rounds in the past year, that it should move away from its previous position: that the Executive should not contribute to the cost of local government reorganisation. Although my three former arguments did not prevail, I am pleased to say that the Executive signed off on a proposal to fund local

government reorganisation — not as much as I would have liked, but nonetheless substantially, and I want to acknowledge that contribution.

Yes, the original bid of a contribution to up-front costs was in and around £40 million.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for the frankness of his answer. Will he give us an update on any financial assessment that he may have commissioned with regard to the cost of rates convergence within the proposed reorganisation?

Mr Attwood: I am pleased to say that, following a series of robust negotiations, the funding package that was agreed by the Executive included a contribution of up to £30 million for the issue of rates convergence to which the Member refers. That modelling is being taken forward by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), working with the Department of the Environment (DOE), and we anticipate that that is the scale of moneys that might be required on the far side of 2015, in order to ensure that there is not a burden placed upon the ratepayers, both domestic and business, for rates convergence issues that will arise post 2015. Based upon the figures to date, a sum of up to £30 million will certainly help significantly to manage the issue of rates convergence following local government reorganisation.

Ms Lo: Obviously, it is welcome news that there will be central government funding given to RPA. However, we heard all that in the media last week, and I understand that all councillors received a letter giving them information about this agreement that the Minister had reached with the Executive. Is it not very remiss of the Minister not to have come to the House or the Committee to give us details about that agreement? We all heard about it in press articles.

Mr Attwood: I must say that there was a lot of speculation about what was or was not agreed at the Executive meeting over two weeks ago. I understand that, on the Floor of this Chamber, one Minister referred to the agreement, in advance of urgent procedure being deployed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in order to sign off on the funding package that was agreed in principle at the Executive over two weeks ago. Consequently, I think it was my responsibility as a Minister to let the people on the front line know, the councillors of Northern Ireland who were hearing from others — not from me — about the scale of the funding package. Consequently, it was my obligation as a Minister and my responsibility as a public

servant to let councillors know the truth of the matter, whatever the speculation.

Mr Weir: I, too, express some disappointment that we did not hear about it formally in this House. Although there has been welcome progress on the financial package for RPA, in the light of that, can he confirm whether there has been any slippage in the RPA timetable, or are we on track?

Mr Attwood: As I have indicated, time after time after time, to the House, the Committee, the Executive and the council clusters, and at every conference that I have spoken at — and there have been many — in my view, the point of no return in respect of local government reorganisation passed a long time ago.

Although I have reservations about elements of local government reform, I have no reservations about the principle. From DOE's point of view, there has been no uncertainty or doubt in respect of doing this, doing it on time and doing it properly. Those are the three standards against which I will be judged. Even though my officials were in contact with council clusters over recent times to ask them to confirm their progress against 11 key performance indicators, two of the councils have yet to reply. It would be quite surprising for the Member to hear which two those are.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give us a sense of the amount of work required for the transition planning, what capacity is required and how that is being progressed?

Mr Attwood: First, in some degree, I have a little residual sympathy with the councils that, heretofore, have seen local government reform not being progressed. Consequently, they may have thought, heretofore, that there might be some uncertainty about whether it would happen in this mandate.

Secondly, I have sympathy for the councils with regard to the scale of what is being undertaken. In my view, the work involved in merging the councils into 11 with regard to the transfer of functions and councils becoming the planning authority on the far side of RPA is not fully appreciated generally. We have indicated 56 performance indicators to the councils in order to ensure that, whatever hesitancy may or may not reside in one or two councils — a lot of councils applied themselves diligently to the work over the past 18 months — those performance indicators will drive their performance and ensure that they get this done on time and get it done right. It is a very

complex undertaking, as it involves hundreds of councillors, thousands of staff and 26 councils. However, now that there is greater certainty around funding and there will be more and more certainly in the near future around other matters, I hope that the councils, together with the DOE, will continue to apply themselves diligently to the task.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 3 and 12 have been withdrawn.

University of Ulster: York Street Campus

2. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of the Environment when the Planning Service will make its decision on the University of Ulster new campus at York Street, Belfast. (AQO 3472/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. It is anticipated that a recommendation on the major York Street University of Ulster proposals will go to Belfast City Council in time for its town planning meeting on 7 March. I have always supported, in principle, the university's proposal to relocate at York Street. When I was a member of the Committee for Employment and Learning a number of years ago, I was one of the MLAs who said that, in principle, it was a wise course of action to locate a university in a city and for it to be part of the regeneration and reconfiguration of the north side of the city of Belfast. It is not an easy planning application to manage, bearing in mind its scale, its massing, traffic and parking, and heritage, nor is it easy to create a scheme that is sympathetic to and reflects the needs of local people, in particular the residents of Carrick Hill.

Mr Humphrey: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council, although I am not a member of the planning committee. Does the Minister agree that this broad development at York Street from the University of Ulster is hugely important to the north-west part of the city and a huge key development in the broad development of that part of the city and, therefore, there should be no undue delay on any planning announcement?

Mr Attwood: If you look at significant planning applications over the past 18 months, although there has, historically, been undue delay, there is no longer, by and large, undue delay. Look at the decision taken last week in respect of Windsor Park, a planning application that was turned round in 11 weeks, and so on and so

forth with regard to other applications being fulfilled within the timelines required, such as Narrow Water bridge, Ravenhill, and so on. Therefore, there is no issue about undue delay in the direction of travel of the planning system.

However, the design of the proposal is of such scale that it will mass significantly on York Street. It will go up very high, and it will have an impact on heritage, parking, traffic, and so on. Therefore, the nature, character and scale of the proposal are very challenging. I hope that nobody in this House or elsewhere thinks that that is an easy call. It is a big call because it is a big proposal, which will have a big impact on that part of the city. If it is done right, it can be part of the overall development in the north side of the city, with the Royal Exchange, north side, the underpass at the Westlink and the Harbour Commissioners proposal at City Quays all gathering around the Cathedral Quarter. We have an unprecedented opportunity to shape that part of the city. That opportunity only comes once in a century.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I welcome the Minister's answers so far. I agree that this is a huge project, which is generally very welcome in north Belfast and wider Belfast. Is the Minister satisfied that the consultation has been comprehensive when we are talking about the impact that the proposal will have on local areas, such as Carrick Hill, as he pointed out, but also New Lodge, Tigers Bay and other areas around there?

Mr Attwood: The Member may be aware that, later this week, I will be meeting Community Places, together with residents of the local areas that he referred to, in order to bring forward their issues and concerns about the development. During the summer and autumn of last year, the community, especially the Carrick Hill community, demonstrated a great sense of dignity and resilience, and I think that they deserve particular respect around issues in that area, including in respect of this planning application.

I have had very frank conversations with the senior management of the University of Ulster about how they should manage the application and the character of the application. I think that we are moving forward, and I would like to see a recommendation going to the city council in respect of the main scheme in advance of the town planning meeting on 7 March. That said, I have major concerns, which the university knows about and Mr Kelly might be hinting at, in respect of a car parking proposal for Frederick

Street. In the fullness of time, that part of the application may have to be separated from the main application in order to go forward.

Mr A Maginness: I think that this will be a great opportunity for north Belfast, and I agree with the Minister. Will he take into consideration and not prejudice the development of some element of social housing, which is needed in that area and which the local people are supportive of?

Mr Attwood: The issue of housing in that area needs careful management. We do not want to see a situation arise where we will have a Holylands II in the north side area between the 'Belfast Telegraph' building and Carrick Hill. There is the potential for that to happen. That is why I welcome the city council's Buchanan report, which, working with the various colleges in Belfast, can map out how the student housing issue might be dealt with over the next number of decades. At the same time, we have to recognise that there will be a demand for social housing in that area. Areas have previously been designated for housing, such as land at Frederick Street, and, in my view, that needs to be respected going forward. I do not think that development of all the available land for the university is the way forward. I believe that there needs to be balanced development, and that will include potential student housing and, most definitely, social housing.

Review of Public Administration

4. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the work currently under way in each of the council areas with regard to the review of public administration. (AQO 3474/11-15)

Mr Attwood: This issue was touched on in the first answer. Over the past 18 months, work has been taken forward by the various council clusters. As I indicated, we asked them to reply to a matrix of performance indicators. I think that I said there were 56 tasks, but there are 54 tasks in total. We asked for information in respect of 11 key tasks. According to the information provided by the councils that replied, 64% of what was required had been achieved and was on track, which means that, as we stand today, one third of the tasks that we consider to be crucial have not yet been achieved or are on track. Now that the financial situation has been confirmed, that should be a catalyst for councils to apply themselves to ensuring that all the key performance tasks are on track and will be done in time for the reorganisation in 2015.

3.15 pm

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his answer. I refer you to your answer to a previous supplementary, when you indicated that at least two councils had not replied to you at all on the key indicators. Does the Minister agree that all councils need to move together and that, if even one or two are dragging their heels, we will not achieve what we are trying to achieve through this review of public administration?

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his supplementary. Although two councils have not yet replied to the questions that I raised, nine have replied, and that is the declaration of intent that I want to hear. Although there may be some doubt about some elements of the reform programme that councils are taking forward in the clusters, many are taking forward that work. The transition committee of Belfast City Council, for example, a council that Mr Newton will be very familiar with, meets twice a month, and its work programme is on the council website. Newtownabbey and Antrim councils are developing work on local development plans, a function that will pass to councils in 2015.

Although one council cluster on the north coast has not replied, I have met each and all of the transition committees. Although there may be concerns about local government reform, and whatever the difficulties may be — I do not discount them — I get a sense from across council clusters that they know that the 2015 date is for real.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Given what the Minister has said, does he now believe that we will meet the timeline for the introduction of shadow councils in 2014, and does he still believe that there is a need for them?

Mr Attwood: I believe in the principle of reform and that public policy, public organisations and the people of the North of Ireland have benefited from reform, however hesitantly some have come to it over the past 30 or 40 years. I believe that there is a need for a further phase of reform in Northern Ireland, of which this is just one example.

There are 750 days until the new councils go live, so the countdown is on. On local government legislation and boundaries and how we will fund this, I believe there is an adequate but not excessive amount of time in which to get this done and done right. I continue to

honour that commitment. There was a bit of a hint from the Member of some doubt on his part. I trust that all Members and parties in the Chamber remain committed to that date and outcome.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister accept that there are significant tensions among some of the councils that it is proposed to merge? Maybe those tensions are one reason why not all councils replied, and maybe they exist among even those that did reply.

Mr Attwood: Change is a challenge, and I would be surprised if there were no tensions. It is only in the tension, I think, that you are able, at a cluster level, to work through the issues and work through them right. If everything was sweetness and light, this would have happened a long time ago, and we would not be having this conversation. The fact that there are tensions is not unhealthy, although some councils that it was speculated would have tensions are among those that replied and are getting on with the job of reorganisation.

Hydraulic Fracturing

5. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment what consideration he has given to claims by the Canadian doctor, Dr Eilish Cleary, regarding the health risks associated with hydraulic fracturing. (AQO 3475/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of the evidence of Dr Eilish Cleary from Canada. Indeed, I think that there is wider evidence from Canada that can help to inform the debate on fracking and whether it should or should not happen. I have read some of Dr Cleary's views, and it seems to me that they are a checklist from the Canadian point of view not just on public health but on the range of concerns and considerations that might be associated with the proposal for fracking. Let me reassure the House and the people of Fermanagh and elsewhere that a health assessment would be integral to any environmental impact assessment, which would be required in the event that a planning application or applications were received for hydraulic fracturing in any part of Northern Ireland.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his answer, particularly given that he anticipated what my supplementary question would deal with. The Minister talked about a health impact assessment. Has he considered

publishing draft guidelines that would inform the debate?

Mr Attwood: There are a number of answers to that. An interdepartmental working group exists, and I have asked that the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety be represented on it. Although I sometimes stretch the competence of this office, I would not dare stretch it to comment decisively on issues of health. The point is that involving the Health Department in the ongoing interdepartmental work on the proposal is to recognise that there are health issues, which are multiple. I met the Environmental Protection Agency in America. Although many people talk about what happens under the ground with fracking and its impact on water quality, there is very much an issue about what happens to air quality above the ground, which is clearly a matter of health. As I said before, there will be no headlong rush to fracking. All environmental, planning and, indeed, health requirements will have to be satisfied by any proposal that is brought forward. We will examine all the research that is beginning to emerge around the proposal. That includes research that my Department is part funding and that is being taken forward by the Environmental Protection Agency in Dublin. My Department is represented on the steering group for that work. It is only when we have all the research and interrogated all the science that a decision can be made whether fracking, in principle, is or is not feasible.

Mr Campbell: The question asks for the Minister's assessment of one particular individual from Canada. Will he assure people across Northern Ireland that he will have an open mind to any benefits that might be derived as a result of fracking, in addition to any possible, however minuscule, health concerns?

Mr Attwood: She may be one individual, but she is the Chief Medical Officer of Health in New Brunswick in Canada. Therefore, she clearly speaks with a level of authority. To be fair about what she said at the seminar in Enniskillen recently, she gave advice from the Canadian perspective across a wide range of issues on hydraulic fracturing, not just health. People need to be careful. The information that she gave touched upon multiple issues that are relevant to the matter.

I will answer Mr Campbell's question more directly. Although I, as a member of my own party, have a view on the proposal of fracking, as a Minister, I have to step back. That is why I have laid down a number of principles: there should be no headlong rush to fracking, and the

science, for and against, in Ireland, Britain, Europe, America and elsewhere, should be interrogated exhaustively. On the far side of the interrogation of the science, if a planning application is brought forward, which may be deemed to be article 31 significant because of its impact and may be subject to a public inquiry as a consequence, only at the end of all those processes might a conclusion be drawn on the matter.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I have listened carefully to what he has said, and he will agree that the negative publicity given to fracking scares the living daylights out of people. To clear the air, can the Minister give us an assurance that until there is absolute scientific proof that fracking is not dangerous, no planning approval will be given?

Mr Attwood: The reassurance that I will certainly give to the Member, the House and the citizens of Northern Ireland is that it is only after exhaustive interrogation of the science that any sensible Minister, Government or Assembly, wherever it might be, should make a judgement. It would be an aspiration to have absolute scientific assurance, but the nature of science is that it is not absolute. Very often, science can lead to conclusions one way or the other. My view is simply this: whatever about the view that I hold as a member of my party, if the science does not lead to the conclusion that this can be done safely, the wise counsel, I think, is that people have to reflect on whether it should be done at all.

Planning Policy Statement 18

6. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to review PPS 18 and supplementary guidelines. (AQO 3476/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member. At present, no, I do not have plans to review planning policy statement 18 (PPS 18) and the supplementary guidelines. In my time in this job, I think that I have demonstrated that I do not shirk looking again at planning policy statements or guidelines. I could give you a family of examples of where I have looked at planning policy statements, be they on natural heritage, tourism, enabling development or retail. Although I am very aware of issues that increasingly are being identified around the operation of PPS 18 and the impact of wind farms, wind turbines and other renewable plant, I have not been convinced, at this stage, that there are compelling reasons to review PPS 18.

Mr McAleer: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Is the Minister aware that 48% of all wind turbine applications are in the constituency of West Tyrone and that areas, such as the hills above Drumquin, have reached saturation point? Will he consider any plans to introduce thresholds on an area-by-area basis?

Mr Attwood: It is already the case that the principle of cumulative impact is in place at a strategic planning level, when it comes to the assessment of wind farms, and at a local divisional level, when it comes to the assessment of wind turbines. Therefore, cumulative impact on various locations in a divisional planning area office is a threshold that is in place and will apply when it comes to making decisions on farms or individual turbines. In that regard, given that the principle of cumulative impact is already accepted, it is, in effect, a level of threshold when it comes to those decisions.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister feel that there is any conflict between his Department and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) regarding the way forward on renewable energy?

Mr Attwood: I am not quite sure what the question may be hinting at. In any case, I can answer only from my point of view, which is that renewable energy is Ireland's biggest economic opportunity. The quality of our wind, wave and tide is the best in the world, and the aspiration to be self-sufficient in electricity and to become an exporter of electricity is conceivable and not beyond our capability. When it comes to the jobs around renewables, be they in manufacturing, research and development, construction or ongoing maintenance for renewable plant, it seems to me to be the way to go. We have an obligation to ensure that 40% of our electricity comes from renewable sources by 2020, and, according to the current trend, we are going to fulfil that obligation. That is my view. If that is DETI's view, there is no conflict between us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of the Environment.

Mr Campbell: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The House is well aware of Mr Speaker's concern, and, I presume, that of the wider House, about the non-appearance at Question Time of Members who tabled questions.

Given that it happened again today, perhaps you could inform Mr Speaker. As well as people not being in their place, it would appear — I received an email indicating the questions that were withdrawn, as, I am sure, did all other Members. Question 11 to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure was not on that list. Perhaps Mr Speaker could investigate that.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Member for putting that on the record. There was an administrative issue. Certainly, what he has said has been put on the record today. If necessary, the Speaker can take up the issue.

Lord Morrow: Further to that point of order, would you like to remind the House of what the procedure is when questions are being withdrawn? As my colleague Mr Campbell has already stated, it was clear at the outset that question 3 to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure had been withdrawn and that questions 5, 13 and 4 had been grouped. There was no mention of question 11. Did I miss it? I suspect that I did. However, do tell us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I invite the Member to have further discussions with the Speaker's Office. I understand that there was an administrative issue in that regard. We will move on.

Executive Committee Business

Antarctic Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Deputy Speaker: This is a rather unusual topic.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the Antarctic Bill to Northern Ireland including the provision making the regulation of activities in Antarctica an excepted matter.

I am delighted to address the House on this hot topic. It is important that in our society now, this House is not a cold house for anyone.

The Assembly will be aware that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have laid a legislative consent memorandum in which they seek support for a legislative consent motion in respect of the Westminster Antarctic Bill to Northern Ireland. The Bill includes a provision that the regulation of activities in Antarctica should be made an excepted matter with regard to our devolution settlement.

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

It might be useful to Members if I briefly outline the background to the issue. The UK Antarctic Act 1994 implemented the protocol on environmental protection to the international Antarctic treaty. That established a regulatory and permitting regime for all British expeditions and nationals who travel to Antarctica. It applies UK-wide. The primary aim of the current Bill is to implement in domestic law a new annex to that protocol to the Antarctic treaty that relates to the prevention of and response to any environmental emergencies in the Antarctic. Part 1 of the Bill does that by requiring all of those who intend to undertake activities in Antarctica to take preventative measures to minimise the risk and the potential impact of environmental emergencies and to develop contingency plans for responding to any such emergency situation. In addition, Part 2 of the Bill includes proposals to enhance environmental protection in Antarctica, particularly for marine plants and invertebrates.

The key issue, however, is the reclassification of Antarctic matters as excepted in terms of the Northern Ireland devolution settlement. To date, all legislation on the regulation of activities in Antarctica has been made on a UK-wide basis. Any relevant functions have been carried out by the UK Government. However, during the drafting of the Antarctic Bill, it was identified that the Antarctic and the subject matter of the Antarctic Act 1994 had inadvertently been devolved to legislators in both Scotland and Northern Ireland. In our case, the matter of regulation of activities in the Antarctic was omitted from schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. I add that, although the matter is technically devolved here, no relevant functions were transferred with it, so no Department here has any legislative powers in relation to the Antarctic. An Assembly Bill would be required to confer such powers if they were considered necessary, although the purposes for which those would be sought are not immediately clear.

The UK Government wish to rectify the situation on the basis of the need for a single coherent regulatory approach to its international obligations under the Antarctic Treaty. Subsequently, with the consent of the Scottish Parliament, they made it a reserved matter as far as Scotland is concerned through the Scotland Act 2012.

Having considered the UK Government's request, the First Minister and deputy First Minister believe that there is no compelling reason to argue for the continued devolution of Antarctic matters. Having obtained the agreement of the Executive to do so, they wish to seek the agreement of the Assembly, by means of the legislative consent motion before us today, that the matter of the regulation of activities in Antarctica should be made an excepted one in schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: I will give way in a second. You can ask whatever questions you want, and I will respond to them, if that is the appropriate protocol.

Although I appreciate that the Assembly would normally, and rightly, be reluctant to concede any diminution in its legislative competence in any area, I hope that Members will agree that it is sensible to do so in the circumstances of this very special case. Therefore, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Clearly, there is a great deal of interest in the motion: we have one Member who wishes to speak.

Mr Nesbitt (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the Minister for that very fulsome and clear explanation. The Committee was briefed by officials on 6 February 2013. Officials explained the need for this legislative consent motion. Following the briefing, the Committee agreed that it was content to support the legislative consent motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: We have a late entry: Mr Jim Allister.

Mr Allister: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was trying to intervene, but I am quite happy to do it this way. I support the legislative consent motion. I was going to ask the junior Minister whether he thought that Antarctica might not be as cold a house for unionists as Belfast City Hall. Antarctica, of course, being one of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member will resume his seat. I get the impression that the Member wants to veer off the subject. I ask him to return to Antarctica.

Mr Allister: As I understand it, British Antarctica is one of 14 British overseas territories. As such, it proudly flies the Union flag. There is no restriction on the number of days on which it flies the Union flag. I was just wondering whether it would be a warmer house for unionists than Belfast City Hall. Happily, part of British Antarctica has been named Queen Elizabeth Land in honour of the jubilee. Will the Minister tell us whether the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), in all its parts, embraces and supports that?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that the junior Minister is now in a position to respond to the rather interesting and diverse debate.

Mr Bell: I thank the two Members who contributed to this interesting debate, particularly the Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister for conveying the Committee's support for the motion. I also thank the Committee for considering the matter within a very tight timescale and producing its report so expeditiously, given that it had no previous background on the subject matter prior to the laying of the legislative consent memorandum.

I am trying not to smile.

Although I appreciate that some might find it strange — *[Interruption.]* I am getting it from both angles now. Although I appreciate that some might find it strange that the Assembly is taking time to discuss the matter of Antarctica and may feel that the motion is of little consequence to the matters that the House normally involves itself in, nevertheless, a key constitutional point is at stake; namely, that the legislative competence of the Assembly should neither be restricted nor expanded without its agreement. That has been the basis of our discussions with the UK Government on this issue. At all times, we emphasised the need to ensure that the Assembly was given its proper place by bringing this legislative consent motion before it today.

I have thanked the contributors to the debate, including the Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Mr Allister asked about the flying of flags. The Finance Minister said that there are no Alliance Party penguins in Antarctica, which caused a bit of a laugh. My position is that I support the respectful and dignified flying of the Union flag, and I have said that at other times in the House. I said earlier —

Mr Weir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bell: Yes.

Mr Weir: Does the Minister agree that this is obviously an issue of particular interest to many unionists? Indeed, there has been a long unionist connection with Antarctica, as one of the most famous Antarctic explorers, Sir Ernest Shackleton, stood as a unionist candidate in the past. Not, I have to say, in Antarctica. Although I am sure that Members are well experienced of long driveways when they are canvassing, I think that that might be particularly lengthy.

Not only does the Union flag fly there but there is the added advantage that, during one of the seasons in Antarctica, the daylight effectively lasts the entire day. Therefore, the Union flag can be seen for long periods of time.

Mr Bell: From my own position, the longer it flies the better — from dawn to dusk. The Honourable Member has made his point.

As a loyal subject of Her Majesty the Queen, I am also delighted that a part of the Antarctic has been named in her honour.

I said earlier that we have had an interesting debate on Antarctica today, even if it is not a matter that we would have expected to have some responsibility for. I hope that all Members agree that it is a responsibility that can be surrendered without any adverse practical effect on our competence to legislate in the future. I also hope that all Members will agree that that will result in a clarification of responsibilities for the regulation of activities in such an important area of the world and, as my colleague pointed out, that some of my distinguished unionist forebears were key to exploring.

I again ask for the support of the House in passing the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker: After that rather interesting and diverse debate, I think that we have arrived at the crucial moment when we will surrender Antarctica.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension of the Antarctic Bill to Northern Ireland including the provision making the regulation of activities in Antarctica an excepted matter.

Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next three items of business are motions from the Minister of Finance and Personnel relating to statutory rules. There will be separate debates on each. Only the motion on the Rates (Regional Rates) Order requires cross-community support.

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

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

I can assure the House that none of these regulations apply to Antarctica or to any other parts other than Northern Ireland. They are, nevertheless, important issues, because they have a grave impact on services and people across Northern Ireland. The first one that I want to bring to the Assembly is the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013.

3.45 pm

This scheme was initially introduced in 2007 for a three-year period, with the objective of encouraging and sustaining the provision of ATMs in rural areas. I believe that this policy objective remains a worthy aim in today's economic climate. The initial scheme was due to finish in March 2010. However, in November 2009, my Department undertook an evaluation of the merits of its operation. A range of research and analysis was undertaken along with consultation with key stakeholders, including the Rural Community Network, the Consumer Council and banking representatives. The view of the Finance and Personnel Committee was also sought at that time.

As a result of that evaluation, it was decided to extend the scheme for three years, a decision that ensured the scheme's existence until 31 March this year. Given the continued provision of ATMs in rural areas and a further increase in their numbers since the scheme was retained in 2010, I propose that it would be prudent to extend the exemption for a further three-year period. The legislation before the Assembly, therefore, continues the scheme until the end of the Budget period in March 2015.

I will turn briefly to what the scheme does. The exemption is provided for stand-alone ATMs that are individually valued on the valuation list, for example, those located outside petrol stations or on high streets. It does not apply to those located in banks or building societies, which tend to be valued as part of that property. As of November 2011, 55 ATMs were eligible for exemption, an increase from the 37 that were eligible when the scheme was introduced in 2007. I recognise that the increase is relatively small, but I believe that it is important to those who benefit from it.

The current cost of the scheme is around £113,000 of revenue that we forgo. I consider that to be an affordable sum, given the benefits that it can bring. There is a risk that the removal of this measure now could jeopardise the viability of machines that are currently exempt, thus having a detrimental economic impact on the communities that they serve. ATMs play a vital role in the sustainability of rural economies. Evidence shows that money withdrawn locally tends to be spent locally. Of every £10 withdrawn from a cash machine, almost two thirds is spent locally. On that basis, I consider that the current exemption for ATMs in rural areas should be extended for a further three years.

My Executive colleagues and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have already been advised of the detail of the statutory rule. The Committee indicated that it was content for individual, separately valued ATMs in designated rural areas to continue to be exempt from rates, particularly given the modest cost of the scheme. Article 1 of the order sets out the citation, commencement and interpretation provisions. Article 2 provides for the extension of the relevant date, before which the scheme must end, to 1 April 2015.

In conclusion, I look forward to Members' comments and commend the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 to the House.

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

Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an méid a dúirt sé. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

Ag a chruinniú ar 7 Samhain 2012, d'amharc an Coiste ar chomhfhreagras ón Aire maidir le meaisíní uathoibríocha airgid saorsheasta i siopaí agus i staisiúin artola a bheas saor ó rátaí i mbardaí áirithe faoin tuath. The Committee, at its meeting on 7 November 2012,

considered correspondence from the Minister on the rates exemption for stand-alone ATMs in designated rural wards.

The Committee noted that the measure, which provides full rates exemption for eligible ATMs, was introduced in 2007 as part of a package of rate relief measures that were aimed at rural areas. Initially, the scheme was to last for three years, ending on 31 March 2010, but, following an evaluation by the Department, and with the Committee's support, the decision was taken to extend the scheme for a further three years until 31 March this year. At that time, the Committee noted that banks had advised that rates exemption did not affect the decision on the provision of new ATMs but may be a consideration when deciding whether to retain existing ATMs.

The Committee noted from the Minister's correspondence in November that stakeholders that were consulted at the time of the original evaluation, including banks, rural community representatives and the Consumer Council, were all extremely supportive of retaining the exemption. The location of the ATMs receiving the exemption also showed that the most isolated rural communities were benefiting most from it.

The Committee agreed with the Minister's proposal to retain the scheme until the end of the Budget period, but it sought clarification on the number of ATMs that had been installed as a result of the scheme. As the Minister said here today, and as his correspondence confirmed, there were 37 rural ATMs at the time that the policy was introduced in 2007, and, by September 2012, there were 55. That is a growth of 18 ATMs over the period that the scheme had been in operation. The Minister was also of the view that the relief may be influencing the retention of ATMs in rural areas.

At its meeting of 28 November the Committee considered the proposal to make the order, and it had no objection to the policy proposals at that time. The formal statutory rule that is before the Assembly today was considered at the Committee's meeting on 13 February 2013, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Assembly affirm the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013. I therefore, on behalf of the Committee, support the motion. Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you very much.

Mr Wilson: I do not think that there is a great deal for me to say, other than to thank the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for his remarks and to thank the Committee for the work that it did on the matter and for the way in which it confirmed that it believes that this is a policy worth continuing. I emphasise that 200 wards in rural areas are covered by the policy across Northern Ireland and that they tend to be the most deprived wards.

All the evidence is that, although this measure may cause only a marginal increase in the number of new ATMs coming into those areas, there have been increases, as the Deputy Chairperson pointed out. It probably is an important measure. The relief amounts to about £2,000 a machine, and it is probably a measure that ensures that those machines stay in rural areas. Of course, with the closure of a lot of bank branches, having access to cash is important. Having access to that cash locally, where people then tend to spend it in shops locally, is also important to the sustainability of the rural community. For all those reasons, I commend the order to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

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

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

As Members will be aware, the Rates (Regional Rates) Order is brought forward annually and stems from the Executive's agreed Budget, which was originally brought to the Assembly back in March 2011. That Budget covers the four-year period from 2011-15. Members will also be aware that the regional rate supplements Northern Ireland's share of relevant public expenditure.

The regional rate provides additional revenue over and above the Barnett settlement, helping to fund departmental expenditure on hospitals, roads, schools and other essential public services, and investment.

To underline the significance of the rating system, over £1 billion is now collected in rates, regional and district, domestic and non-domestic. Taken together, the domestic and commercial regional rate will raise £627 million in the next rating year.

I will describe the breakdown of rate bills. The regional rate represents just over half of the typical bill, with the other half being made up of district rates, which are set independently by local councils. When the four-year Budget was agreed, the Executive pledged that the regional rate would be frozen in real terms until 2014-15 to provide certainty and stability for businesses and households to plan and manage their finances.

A real-terms freeze is adjusted for the effect of inflation. We are using the Treasury gross domestic product (GDP) deflator as an inflationary measure. That is the lowest measure of inflation that there is. In comparison with other inflation indices, it could be argued that there is a real-terms decrease in rates over the period.

The legislation that is before the House for approval today is the simple outworking of an important Budget decision that we have already made. It will fix two regional rates in the pound for 2013-14: one for households; and one for business ratepayers. The new rates in the pound represent a small increase of 2.7% in the regional rate for the 2013-14 rating year for households and businesses.

The Executive are committed to ensuring that household and commercial budgets are protected, given the continuing economic difficulties that are being faced across the board. Contrast that with the average rise of over 10% in the regional rate across the last four years of direct rule. The order therefore represents the best that we can do to balance the interests of ratepayers and the demands of public expenditure.

Some may argue that the regional rate should be reduced to alleviate the pressures of the continued economic downturn, which is affecting the domestic and non-domestic sectors. The economic pressures of the past five years have been unprecedented, but I firmly believe that the Executive have taken a sensible and measured approach. Any cut in the regional rate would mean a reduction in resources for other areas.

The regional rate increases were agreed at the start of the Budget period in line with the Executive's projected expenditure. Holding the regional rate constant in real terms also complements the commercial rating measures introduced since April 2012.

One of the measures included at that time was a levy on large retail premises, which was designed to rebalance the burden of rates on the business sector. This year's order also serves to fix the additional regional rate in the pound that is to be levied on large retail premises, which is otherwise known as the large retail levy. The large retail levy is set at an additional 15%, on average, to the large retail premises rates liability. The levy also increases in accordance with the non-domestic and domestic regional rate increases.

That levy has gone some way to funding the expansion of the small business rate relief scheme, which now assists around 24,000 small businesses in Northern Ireland. In addition, manufacturing rates continue to be held at 30%, helping around 4,500 manufacturing businesses. That is an economic support measure that is unique to Northern Ireland.

Over half Northern Ireland business ratepayers now receive some form of rate relief.

4.00 pm

The Executive have gone to considerable lengths to provide that level of support, continuing to put the interests of business first by looking at ways to help firms through the downturn. In the domestic sector, decisions

taken by the Executive and Assembly on domestic rates and the funding of water have ensured that the average household in Northern Ireland continues to pay the lowest charges in the United Kingdom, and by some distance. Of course, that benefits business too, because it means that households have more disposable income and, therefore, more money to spend in local businesses.

My approach, and that of my Executive colleagues, continues to be that we will not dip into the pockets of households and local businesses any more than is necessary until we have made all the savings that there are to be made in delivering efficient and effective regional government and public services.

That is enough context. These are all matters that were carefully considered and agreed when we set the Budget. Allow me to move on to the more technical matters that are covered in the draft order.

The order's main purpose is to give effect to the decisions made during the Budget process by specifying the regional rate poundages for 2013-14. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply in the 2013-14 rating year through to 31 March 2014. Article 3 specifies 33.02 pence in the pound as the commercial regional poundage and 0.3882 pence in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage. Article 4 specifies 8.7 pence in the pound as the additional regional rate in respect of large retail hereditaments.

I look forward to hearing Members' comments, and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Mr D Bradley (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas fosta leis an Aire as an méid a dúirt sé ina chuid cainte i dtosach báire. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

The 2011-15 Budget, which was agreed by the previous Assembly on 7 March 2011, proposed that both domestic and non-domestic regional rate increases should be uplifted only in line with inflation. The purpose of today's rule is to set the rate of uplift for 2013-14. It also provides for the continuation of the levy on large retailers, which was introduced in April 2012 as a measure towards rebalancing the rating system by funding an extension of the small business rate relief scheme.

The policy proposals contained in the statutory rule were considered by the Committee on 28 November 2012. The Committee had no issues to raise in respect of these policy proposals at that time. The Committee formally considered the statutory rule that is before the Assembly today at its meeting on 13 February 2013, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules, which had no points to raise by way of technical scrutiny of the rule.

D'aontaigh an coiste an rún seo a mholadh don tionól. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed by the Assembly. I, therefore, support the motion on behalf of the Committee.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Deputy Chairman for his contribution. I also thank him for always giving me warning of when I should start looking for my notes for closing the debate. He goes into this flourish of Irish which I do not understand a word of, but I know that it is a signal of, "You will be on your feet in about 30 seconds, so find your notes so that you can conclude the debate."

The fact that there has been very little contribution is probably an indication of one of two things. Either Members are fed up listening to me and just want to get me to sit down quickly, or Members are reasonably content that the decisions on rates that we have made in the Budget are, as I have said, a measured and balanced approach to the whole issue of rates. We have to raise money for the public services that people in Northern Ireland rightly demand. On the other hand, we should not be taxing people to a level that impacts on their living standards, especially when we are in the middle of an economic recession.

The Assembly and the Executive have got the balance right. We have to maintain the additional money that rates give us for all of the vital things that we deliver, and, at the same time, we should not go down the draconian route that we had under direct rule, when people were getting hit with 10% increases every year. Of course, that was during better economic times, when you could have argued that the Assembly had more money because more money was coming from the Exchequer at Westminster.

We have had to design our expenditure policies to facilitate the kind of restraint that we have shown on rates. That has benefited households and businesses. Sometimes, the Assembly is not given credit for the decisions

that we make in this area. Other authorities across the United Kingdom, when it comes to the difficult decisions that have to be made on expenditure, immediately turn to ratepayers and think that they will bail them out and make money available to them. We have not done that, and that should be recognised as one of the very significant contributions that we have made to household budgets at this time of recession. For that reason, I have pleasure in recommending this order to the Assembly for its affirmation.

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

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

Mr Wilson: I beg to move

That the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Before dealing with the statutory rule, I will set out some background to the measure. The purpose of the legislation is to extend the empty shops rates concession, which I implemented in April last year. That concession was introduced as an amendment to the Rates (Amendment) Bill (Northern Ireland) 2012, which was scrutinised by Members during debates in February last year. At that time, I was introducing a package of measures aimed at rebalancing the rating system, assisting ailing businesses and improving the appearance of our towns and city centres.

The empty shops rates concession provides a one-year concession, which effectively allows 50% empty-property relief to continue for one year when a qualifying property, which has been empty for at least one year, becomes occupied again. The current legislative provision under article 31D of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, as inserted by the Rates (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2012, permits applications for that concession until 31 March 2013.

The window for applications closes soon, and, following some early analysis of the success of the scheme, I have made the decision to extend the application period for another two years, taking us to the end of the Budget period.

To date, over 90 businesses have been successful in their applications for the scheme. There have been over 150 applications, most of which have been dealt with by Land and Property Services (LPS). Members often criticise LPS for its slowness in assessing some of these things, but given the amount of work that is required to do these assessments, I think that it is commendable that it has done nearly 150 assessments. Some 93 businesses, I think, have now benefited as a result. Of course, that means more employment and more footfall in town centres.

Unfortunately, there remains a need to provide whatever assistance we can to counteract the many shop closures and the effect that that has on the vitality of our towns and cities. I have seen the effects of the prolonged period of

downturn in my constituency and in other towns and cities that I visit as part of my ministerial role. The extension of this concession will allow LPS to continue to receive applications for the scheme until the end of March 2015.

I have to say that the scheme has been a good one so far and has led to 92 businesses opening and getting up and running across Northern Ireland. I have visited a range of businesses that have benefited from the scheme, including a fish market in Enniskillen, a children's shop in Larne, a gift shop in Londonderry, a retro scooter shop in Carrickfergus and a restaurant in Belfast. Tomorrow — maybe it is Thursday — I am going to a shop on the Donegall Road that has opened as a result of the scheme. Of course, all of that creates new jobs for local people.

It may not be a big-bang policy in terms of its impact, but as is the case with many of the policies that the Assembly introduces, it is one more small piece in helping to revitalise our economy. That is important. Sometimes, people look for schemes that suddenly hit the headlines and bring about thousands of jobs. It is very often the little initiatives that Ministers, the Executive and officials come up with that lead to improvements. I think that this is one of those policies. It will help to add to the revitalisation of town centres and arterial routes.

It is also a sensible measure in terms of cost. The Executive would not have been getting any more money in from these units through rates if they had continued to be empty anyway. So, this is effectively a cost-neutral policy. Indeed, looking longer term, these businesses will end up paying full rates after the difficult first year of trading is over, so it may prove to earn us money in the long run.

It is a unique “made in Northern Ireland” policy, and I promised the Assembly that I would review it in-year. My Department has undertaken that work. My officials have found no instances of it being misused. In other words, there is no evidence of displacement, and I think that it is entirely sensible to continue with it in order to help to reduce the number of empty shops on our high streets.

Such has been the success of our scheme that Scotland has already announced that it is replicating our policy from April of next year. As Members may be aware, shortly after I announced the policy last year, it featured in the final recommendations of the Mary Portas report on high streets. The Welsh are now considering following suit. So, we have led the way, and it has been one of those innovative

policies that, happily, is being copied elsewhere.

I turn now to the statutory rule itself. My Executive colleagues and members of the Finance and Personnel Committee have been advised on its detail. The Committee indicated that it was content for the empty shops rates concession to continue until 31 March 2015. Article 1 of the order sets out the citation and commencement. Article 2 provides for the amendment of Article 31D of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, substituting the new end date of 31 March 2015. In conclusion, I look forward to Members' comments, and I commend the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 to the House.

4.15 pm

Mr D Bradley (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an méid a dúirt sé ina chuid cainte i dtosach báire. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks.

Cuireadh an Coiste Airgeadais agus Pearsanra ar an eolas faoin mholadh le caoga faoin gcéad d'íslíú rátaí a chur ar fáil do dhaoine atá ag glacadh seilbhe ar shiopaí folmha nuair a thug an tAire eolas dóibh ar 11 Eanáir 2012. The Minister has more than 70 seconds to go.

The Committee for Finance and Personnel was first advised of the proposal to provide 50% relief for one year to the new occupier of an empty shop during a ministerial briefing on 11 January 2012. This was an amendment to the Rates (Amendment) Bill, the other provisions of which the Committee had already considered in some detail and reported on to the Assembly. Members heard that, to qualify, a shop needed to be empty for at least a year and that new businesses would not be limited to the retail sector. It was proposed that the measure, intended to bring empty shops back into use and rejuvenate town centres, would last only for the 2012-13 rating year.

In response to members' questions, the Minister advised that the scheme was not funded but that some revenue would be forgone in the first year of occupancy. In the longer term, it could of course be beneficial because of the rates that would be collected from a more established business. The draft amendment was subsequently considered by the Committee at its meeting on 18 January 2012, and the Chairperson confirmed the Committee's support

for the measure in his speech to the Assembly on 24 January 2012.

On 24 October 2012, the Committee received a briefing from a senior Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) official on a range of rating issues, which included the empty shops rates concession. Members heard that, at that point, 32 businesses had made successful applications to the relief, although subsequent correspondence confirmed that the number had risen to 42 by the end of October. It was estimated that the rates forgone totalled £80,000. However, DFP did not think that the businesses would have set up without the rates concession.

During the evidence session, the Committee also heard that the Scottish Government had announced a similar scheme for 2013, and the Welsh Assembly Government were considering the introduction of a similar scheme. The DFP official advised that the Minister was considering extending the scheme for the remainder of this Budget period and explained the steps being taken to promote and raise awareness of it.

Following the evidence session, the Committee agreed to support the extension of the empty properties rates concession. The Committee subsequently considered the proposal for the rule before us today at its meeting on 28 November 2012 and agreed that it had no objection to the policy proposals. The rule was formally considered at the Committee's meeting on 13 February 2013, and it was noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had no issues to raise by way of technical scrutiny.

D'aontaigh an Coiste an rún seo a mholadh don Tionól. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed by the Assembly, so, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Member for the verbal wink or nod that he was ready for me to wind on the debate. I thank him for the comments that he made on behalf of the Committee and, once again, for the Committee's work on the issue.

I do not want to add a great deal to what I said in my opening speech. The Deputy Chairman referred to the number of businesses that have benefited and the approximate cost. He said that, by October, 42 businesses had applied and been successful. Between October and now, that figure has gone up by 50, so we now have 92. I think that that shows that, as the scheme becomes better known, more people

are applying for it. Of course, assessments have to be done.

Although he talked about revenue forgone, I like to think that we will not lose any money from this. If the property remains empty, we get 50% of the rates anyway, and we get only 50%. If we allow the property to be occupied for a year, still at 50%, we are getting only what we would have got anyhow had the property remained empty. Had full rates been applied to the 92 properties that have been forgone, revenue would have been £225,000. However, as I said, had the shop remained empty, we would not have been getting that revenue anyhow. If the shops remain occupied for a further year, we will have recouped all that money, because we get the 100% rates in the second year, and anything after the second year is additional revenue.

So, I see this as a way of pump-priming the local economy, getting businesses in and eventually, of course, having them pay their full contribution in rates. There would also be all the other attendant benefits, such as additional employment, additional activity, the improvement of town centres and arterial routes as a result of that business activity and, of course, the benefit that there will be to local people having another new business open in their areas. So, there are many benefits to this, and I do not think that we should look at this as a policy through which the Executive are handing out money. This is simply a policy where, for one year, we accept that we will get only 50% of the rates, which is all that we would have got anyway had the business not opened. After that, there is a net benefit to the public purse as a result of the rates that come in.

As I said and as the Deputy Chairman alluded to, this is a policy where we in Northern Ireland led the way. It is having benefits right across, and there is not a constituency that is represented here where the benefit has not been felt. I know that the Deputy Chairperson's constituency includes more than just Newry and Mourne, but 10 businesses in that area have benefited from this. As I said, all constituencies seem to have benefited, some to a greater extent than others. I commend the order to the Assembly, and I trust that it will receive Assembly assent today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013 be affirmed.

Committee Business

Sport: Grass-root and Elite Sports Facilities

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

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the target in the Sport Matters strategy to have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities by 2014 that will support player and athlete development in Olympic and Paralympic sports; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider prioritising funding towards grass-root sports and elite facilities from within her existing budget, to ensure that our sportspeople competing in future Olympic and Commonwealth Games are not disadvantaged as a result of lack of investment.

I will begin by providing some context and background to the reasons behind the Committee tabling the motion. Mr Deputy Speaker, as you will be aware, the Committee and, indeed, the Assembly are on record as recognising the dedication, commitment and success of all our sportspeople following their superb achievements at the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. However, the Committee felt that, although it is important to acknowledge those achievements, it is more important to ensure that there is a genuine lasting legacy for all our sportspeople following the games.

To that end, the Committee agreed in September 2012 to conduct a focused review to explore the issues and challenges facing our sportspeople to get a better understanding of what they need to build on their successes at international competitions and to increase participation in their respective sports. That is why the Committee then wrote to the governing bodies of competitive sports to get their assessment of the legacy of the 2012 games, the challenges facing their sport and measures that could be taken to address them, and the relationship between grass-roots and elite sports.

As a part of the review, the Committee also invited the governing bodies to attend a stakeholder event on 22 September last year, at which those issues were discussed in much greater depth. Some 22 sports governing bodies were represented at that event. Sports that participated in the review included athletics, badminton, tennis, swimming, martial arts, motorsport, cycling, and water- and equestrian-based sports. The review did not include the so-called big-three sports — football, GAA and rugby — which have seen, and will see, significant capital investment in this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period. The Committee wanted to focus its attention on the needs of other sports to see how they might capitalise on the successes and maximise the benefits of the London games ahead of the Rio Olympics in 2016 and, more immediately, the Glasgow Commonwealth Games in 2014.

The Committee is aware of the Minister's commitment to sport, as outlined in her Sport Matters strategy. Indeed, there are no less than 25 targets in the strategy, aspiring to create a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport. At its inception in 2009, the strategy noted that, in the provision of sporting facilities, Northern Ireland is under-provided for compared with other regions in the United Kingdom and Europe. Therefore, it is good to note that in the recently published 'Sport Matters Implementation Group Progress Report' for October 2011 to September 2012 — indeed, it was published only in the past two weeks — the target to have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities that will support Northern Ireland player and athlete development in Olympic and Paralympic sports by 2014 is reported as having been achieved.

Despite that, many governing bodies reported common challenges during the Committee's review that suggest that the issues facing sport organisations may have a negative impact on the development of our players and athletes and on the future growth and success of their sport. It is perhaps not surprising that one of the main challenges that many of the sports faced was that they had limited or no access to funding. The impacts of that varied across the different sports. Many of the governing bodies reported that current sport facilities were inadequate and did not provide a proper environment for competitive training. Some reported the need for an elite training facility or centre of excellence so that high-end performers can train and practise in first-class conditions. Other sports found their players having to travel outside Northern Ireland to train for international competitions. Furthermore, with little or no funding available for

participation in international competitions, some sports have to make a choice about attending events or selecting a team based on players' ability to afford travel costs as opposed to their ability to compete. The Committee was concerned about the impact that that practice would have on those sports in the longer term.

Another consequence of the lack of adequate facilities is that some sports are unable to attract events to Northern Ireland. Given the anticipated benefits to Northern Ireland of Belfast hosting the World Police and Fire Games in August — not least the arrival of 25,000 visitors — I am sure that Members agree that we should take every opportunity to attract sporting events and that the condition of our current facilities should not be an obstacle to achieving that.

The Committee is mindful of the pressures on the Minister's budget and acknowledges the difficult job that she has in balancing investment with tangible benefits. However, the Committee calls on her to ensure that the smaller sports are not overlooked for investment. Although their spectator and participation numbers may be lower than those of the big-three sports, without any investment those other sports will never have the opportunity to grow and develop.

The Committee heard that, for some sports, an investment of around £10,000 would make an enormous difference to participation across the board. Other sports, however, were in need of a much larger capital investment. We heard, for example, that athletics, cycling and tennis all need an indoor sports facility. Other sports, such as hockey, highlighted the need for a specific type of surface for their pitches.

4.30 pm

As Members will be aware, one of my constituents, Martyn Irvine, won silver and gold medals at the world track cycling championships in Minsk last week, and that was raised in the Assembly this morning. In the past few days, the spotlight has been put on the amount of funding that has been invested in cycling in Northern Ireland and the need for an indoor facility. Martyn Irvine and Wendy Houvenaghel have had tremendous success without that local investment, but what more could be achieved with it?

The Committee recognises that local councils also have a role to play in the provision of those facilities. However, that, in itself, comes with some unique challenges, given the financial constraints that many councils face. The

Committee heard that surfaces were not maintained to the standard required, and swimming reported that there was limited access to the facilities and that that often clashed with public opening times.

Another challenge facing sports was the relationship with funding for grass-root and elite sports. Many report that, where funding was available, it was directed at high-performance and elite sportspeople. However, there were concerns that more investment was needed at grass-roots level to ensure a long-term legacy from the 2012 Olympic Games. There was recognition that elite performers rise from grass-roots level and, therefore, it was essential to invest at that level to ensure that elite sportspeople emerge.

Governing bodies also recognise the commitment and dedication of their volunteers. However, many found that, to properly grow, full-time development officers were needed. The Committee also heard that improvements are needed to our coaching and mentoring systems to enable sports to develop top-quality coaches capable of getting the best performance from our sportspeople.

Lack of visibility of smaller sports was also identified as a challenge. That was attributed to the absence of those sports in the school curriculum, lack of competitions held here and low profile in the media. Lack of visibility also had an impact on sports failing to attract private sponsors, therefore creating a reliance on public funding.

Over the past year, the Minister has demonstrated her commitment to sport through an additional investment of £1.5 million each to the IFA, the GAA and the IRFU over the next three years to tackle poverty and social exclusion in those sports. The Minister has also made available £3.27 million for boxing. However, the Committee calls on the Minister to assess how her Department can assist other sports to address the challenges that they face. Given the current economic climate, the Committee appreciates that there is not a bottomless pot of money. However, if those sports do not receive additional investment, any legacy from the Olympic and Paralympic Games will not be realised, as our grass-roots players will not develop and our elite sportspeople will not compete on an even keel against their competitors.

The Committee urges the Minister to talk with those sports to gain a fuller understanding of their needs and to identify areas for investment. Today's economic climate means that we all

need to think outside the box. Therefore, that investment may come in the form of a shared sports facility or access to schools, colleges and university facilities. Therefore, the Committee also urges the Minister to talk with her ministerial colleagues in the Department of Education, the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to secure access. For those sports where a one-size-fits-all approach will not fit, the Committee urges the Minister to provide investment, particularly at times when she finds herself in a position to reallocate funds from within her existing budget. It is only through investment to improve facilities that we will deliver high-performance players and athletes and make our mark on the world's sports stage.

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

Miss M McIlveen: In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank all those Members who will contribute to today's debate and encourage them to support the motion. I commend the motion to the House.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo inniu. There is no doubt that the success of some of our local athletes at the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics has given a boost to local sport. Níl dabht ar bith ann gur tugadh spreagadh do spórt áitiúil mar gheall ar rath ár lúthchleasaithe áitiúla i gcluichí Oilimpeacha agus Parailimpeacha, 2012. Success begets success, and that is surely one of the reasons why we have such an upsurge in interest in sports such as boxing, to name but one, but I am sure that it is the same for other sports that have produced champions.

Those achievements will have inspired many former sporting fans to get back into a sport from which they may have lapsed or to become involved in a new sport or even just to reconnect with some physical activity. The fact is that the recent successes have been good for us locally, as they have encouraged and inspired us. Over the past few days, we have seen even more success for Irish athletes as they continue to take more titles and medals at all levels. Martyn Irvine, Katie Taylor and the women's rugby team spring to mind immediately.

As a result of this new focus on local sport, many more of us are looking to see how we can participate and what facilities are available to

allow us to do that. De thoradh an fhócais nua seo ar spórt áitiúil tá níos mó againn ag iarraidh a fháil amach cad é mar is féidir linn páirt a ghlacadh i spórt agus cad iad na háiseanna atá ar fáil leis sin a dhéanamh. On the back of the 2012 success, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure undertook a survey to establish the conditions for local sports to find out what issues they were facing. A stakeholder event was held in November 2012, and although there were specific issues for individual sports, there were common themes affecting them all, such as the need to further develop and grow their sport at grass-roots and elite sports levels. So, clearly, there is a need to provide support to all sports. Although it is the high-profile sports, such as Gaelic games, soccer and rugby that we hear of most often, we cannot forget or neglect the others.

The health and well-being benefits of participating in sport and physical activity are so well documented as to be an absolute no-brainer by now. Physical activity improves our life chances, increases our enjoyment of life, makes us look and feel better in mind and body and generally makes it more likely that we will make positive choices in other aspects of our lives. So, how many of us are actually becoming more active? Mar sin de, cá mhéad againn atá ag éirí níos gníomhaí? Evidence from recent surveys shows that while there are still groups in society that participate less than average, overall, there has been a rise in sport participation. However, there is still the gender differentiation, whereby 34% of males record 2.5 active hours weekly, which is almost double that of females. Team sport has declined, although there has been an increase in individual physical activity.

As the motion that we are addressing today states, one of the targets in the Sport Matters strategy is to have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities by 2014 that will support player and athlete development in Olympic and Paralympic sports. The most recent progress report coming from the Sport Matters implementation group tells us that that target has been achieved, which is great news. I have also heard that a new programme will be launched over the next year, which will seek to build on those achievements, as there is still more to be done. It is good to hear that.

We also welcome the fact that, over the next few years, we will have three top-class sporting stadia in Belfast to cater for the needs of the three main sports. Those facilities will also serve other needs and will not just be limited to sport. Cuirimid fáilte roimh an scéala go mbeidh trí staidiamáí den scoth againn sna

cúpla bliain atá amach romhainn a bheas ar fáil do na trí spórt mhóra. We also need to be aware that, despite that, there is still a shortfall overall in the provision of sporting facilities. Over one third of the population here live more than 20 miles from a recognised high-quality facility, so there is still more to be done. Tá níos mó le déanamh go fóill.

Therefore, although we celebrate the three big sports, we need to encourage participation in all sports. People should be free to choose whichever sport they wish to take part in, and, as far as possible, we should seek to provide the facilities to do that.

We call on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to continue the great work that she has been doing in supporting our local sports and athletes. We wish to see continuous support and encouragement from other Departments and local councils in investing in facilities for sport, to allow us to look ahead to future competitions to ensure that Irish athletes are able to compete on a level playing pitch with others throughout the world. Tacaím leis an rún. I support the motion.

Mr Kinahan: I am extremely pleased to speak on this motion, although I am not a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure. It may not look like it, but I was, and am, a very keen sportsman, although I challenge anyone to be a better armchair sportsman than me now, as that is all that I am left with. As is usual with these debates, the main points have been covered, therefore, I will go into slightly different matters, which, I think, relate. The motion calls on the Minister to consider:

"prioritising funding towards grass-root sports and elite facilities from within her existing budget".

In line with the motion, we must do so in a way that our sports people are not disadvantaged in the future.

Sport Matters: the Northern Ireland strategy for sport and physical recreation, 2009-19, sets out the investment and increased investment in sport. However, the strategy also states that it is to be:

"in areas such as education, health, the economy and the development of communities".

That is the area I want to explore. I am sure the Minister will clarify in her answers to others on how successful the spend so far has been. I

fully support that angle of the motion but I want to concentrate on that old chestnut of joined-up government. We all call for it but very rarely do we see anything happening. Yet here we have a Department with a small budget, which makes joined-up government even more important. Money is probably wasted by duplication of resources or inefficiencies — not so much in this Department but in other Departments.

If, for example, you look at education and think of the schools, sports fields, the PE and everything that goes on with the health of our children, a lot of money is being spent there that could, maybe, be spent in just a slightly different way to help us in what we are talking about. We also want to see those facilities opened up to all out of hours. The Department for Employment and Learning has the same issue with universities, colleges and skills and training facilities. We need to see those opened up to everybody else.

There is the Department of Health and its policies, and we have already heard about the push for walking and exercise. There is also the Northern Ireland physical activity strategy. The Department for Social Development is spending money on parks, playparks and community groups. Again, I am sure there is a certain amount of overlap there.

It amused me when I was thinking of other Departments and their spends. Of course, our Minister at the Department for Regional Development is encouraging everyone to undertake active travel and bicycle, walk or even run to work. It may take me a while from Templepatrick. However, if we think of Martyn Irvine, maybe we should all be racing here on our bicycles. It is really a matter of using every facility that is here in front of us.

We know that the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has £118 million, which has yet to be spent. There is a lot of money in all Departments and maybe we could be making better use of that. I ask the Minister to push for a spearheading from her Department or one that works from OFMDFM.

One matter that always seems to be let out is not so much about getting fit but is absolutely key to incentivising people to do better, and it is the need to have our own sports museum so that we can look at the great successes of people such as Mary Peters or, more recently, Martyn Irvine. A sports museum would lift everybody and mark how successful we have been in the Olympics and many other events.

If we look at the Belfast Agreement, we will see the need for consensus. I would hope that we can see all Departments working together to use that consensus to make sure that we do find a way forward so that we are not duplicating the money that we are spending.

I also want to touch on all the rules, whether security or health and safety rules, or insurance. All those matters stop people from being able to take part in sports or make the most of the facilities around them. I ask the Minister certainly to look into the issue of insurance. Once, when trying to get permission to borrow a little bit of land in Parkgate to put up one set of football posts, we were stymied by the insurance.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is coming to a close.

Mr Kinahan: That is the absolute basics to it all. So, I very much support the motion and I hope that we achieve what it intends.

Mrs McKeivitt: I support the motion, which calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to prioritise funding and ensure that the Sport Matters strategy target to have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities available by 2014 is achieved. That target, better known as the PL23, is just one of 26 targets set out in the strategy for sport and physical recreation, 2009-19. However, it is a key target, because without facilities little else can be achieved.

4.45 pm

The themed strategy, which focuses on participation, performance and places, is a detailed document that not only focuses on the cost of providing facilities but gives an oversight to the benefits of getting involved in sport and physical activity. The consultation for the strategy had a huge response from the sports organisations and welfare and medical groups, all of which articulated the health benefits and savings to running our Health Department.

In today's world, people are less active than in the past, and spend more time watching television or playing on computers. Our society appears to discourage active lifestyles, such as walking to school or the shops, and a decreasing amount of children's time in school is spent being active. When you do not have the facilities, particularly in rural areas, it is very hard. Therefore, I was pleased to learn today that my local area is to benefit from a new facility in Ballyholland, with an investment of more than £800,000 by the Southern

Organisation for Action in Rural areas (SOAR), Newry and Mourne District Council and the community. Investments like that open up doors and dreams for everyone.

Sport adds to a wide range of social, economic and cultural needs. It improves our health and well-being and gives us opportunities in a fast moving world to come together, celebrate and enjoy shared experiences. I should say that, since the new year, I have taken to the treadmill myself. Although, as you might observe, I am not completely match fit yet, I do feel a tremendous benefit. The experience has shown me that physical activity is good for everyone, but, more importantly, should be available for everyone.

As I argued in the spring Supplementary Estimates debate, and will continue to argue, the Department is worthy of a bigger share of our overall Budget. We must work with what we have got at the moment; hence the need for the Minister to prioritise funding towards grass-roots sports and elite facilities. We have seen great achievements from our elite athletes, at the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games, on golf courses around the world, on sports fields, on ice and on the sea. The World Police and Fire Games will give us another opportunity to showcase our ability to stage major sporting events. However, our legacy must be built on those successes and support athletes' development in Olympic and Paralympic sports. The £81 million capital funding shortfall identified by Sport NI must be addressed. The momentum built from recent successes should not be lost.

Ms Lo: I support the motion, but would like to express my disappointment at the Alliance Party amendment not having been selected. I recall the debate, in November last year, on the legacy of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It was said then, and I say again now, that we must ensure that there is a genuine lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympics and that the opportunities for all people in sport and physical recreation become more widely available. I had hoped to see the motion further extended to include an emphasis on shared facilities. The Sport Matters strategy has a target of creating or upgrading 10 facilities by 2014, as the Committee Chair mentioned earlier. I ask the Minister to ensure that any new facilities are delivered on a shared basis. Our draft amendment called on the Minister to conduct an audit of sports facilities to identify ways of increasing sharing across the whole community. I urge the Minister to consider doing that. We need to know what facilities in what areas are being underused and how best

to share facilities for everyone. I wholeheartedly agree that our sportspeople should not be disadvantaged by lack of investment, but nor should lack of access be an obstacle. We often talk about a shared future. Unfortunately, those discussions are frequently academic and lack a degree of practicality. We know that physical exercise has health benefits. Like the Member who has just spoken, I have taken up physical exercise; I took up swimming, recently. It has benefited me greatly and has helped my recurring neck problem. Sport also has the power to break down barriers in society and to bring people together. It is a practical tool for fostering good community relations, and that must never be underestimated.

After the sporting successes last summer, when our athletes brought us enormous pride, many commented that participation in sport would increase. I was interested, but not surprised, to read the Scottish study that said that that effect would be achieved only if there was a high level of community engagement in legacy planning.

Given the wider health and social benefits of physical exercise, particularly with regard to obesity-related illnesses, I am interested to know how much discussion the Minister has had with the Health Minister on joint investment for grass-roots sport. Of course, the responsibility does not lie only with DCAL and DHSSPS; district councils are also significant investors, as previously mentioned.

The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's inquiry into participation in sport highlighted the role that local councils have in developing grass-roots sports, particularly with regard to facilities. Given the unmet demand in sports halls across council areas, upgrading venues, so that a variety of sports teams can utilise them, is not only economically sound, but has the added benefit of ensuring that they are available to more people.

Before I close, I add a note of thanks to those who have worked so hard to build community relations through sport. Two weeks ago, the Crusaders/Cliftonville match was postponed amidst an unnotified protest. That disruption was unacceptable. I am aware that measures had been taken to make the sporting event a safe, inclusive and successful football match, and plans included a cross-community walk to the football ground. Sadly, given the events that followed, that work was overshadowed. We should all do better to find ways of expressing our gratitude and support —

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

Ms Lo: — to those who endeavour to use sport as a means of bridging divides. I take this opportunity to thank them.

Mr Hilditch: I rise in support of this afternoon's motion. Given my background in sport and some of the work that I have undertaken, I believe that the motion is well balanced in that it allows for the upgrade and refurbishment of existing facilities, together with the desire to provide much sought after new complexes. I acknowledge the Minister's dilemma, with one of the smallest departmental budgets set against the target, and the sizeable task ahead.

The debating of the motion today is timely, because, as anyone who follows the sports media will have seen, a large number of sports awards ceremonies have taken place across the Province within the past month. In recent days, I have noted some in Fermanagh, right through to my constituency of East Antrim. I mention that to, again, pay tribute to the many people who have contributed to sport and keeping clubs going through some of the toughest times in our country. Sometimes, they do it with the poorest of facilities and, sometimes, with nothing.

Our elite sportsmen and sportswomen deservedly take the limelight, but, down the pyramid to grass-roots level, there are not only the athletes, but the administrators, coaches and volunteers who give of their time freely and, in some cases, provide finance to ensure that their sport or club survives. Those people play a massive role in bringing people together through sport. Generation after generation, they did so when others were intent on driving communities apart. What better reward for those unsung heroes than, perhaps, to see the beginnings of a proper investment strategy that is aimed at developing facilities. Of course, I am aware that some sections of certain sports have benefited from previous opportunities on funding, but, as I have alluded to in the House before, we are in danger of creating the haves and the have-nots of sport. That is why a way forward must be balanced and reach as many people as possible in our communities.

An example of the position that some clubs and sports groups find themselves in was evidenced to me on Saturday past, when I was at one of our designated stadiums. It was a bitterly cold winter's afternoon, but the hot water system collapsed for the umpteenth time. It involved the boiler, pumps, valves, showers and radiators.

That club, which has just laid a new pitch at its own expense to improve its facilities, must try to

find additional cash to replace a water system that has been repaired many times before: a sticking-plaster job. Does it do another sticking-plaster job on top of one that has been done before, or does it invest in a new system in a building that will, probably, become uninhabitable or even condemned shortly?

That closure would affect the entire community because the club is heavily involved in work to tackle social deprivation in the area. That is why there must be a robust assessment of need as part of the strategy.

Finally, I commend the research documents that were compiled for the debate. It is especially interesting to look at examples of work in other places. In particular, I would like to draw the Minister's attention to the Scottish model. I ask her to consider that model, which created a series of community sports hubs as the country moves towards hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2014. I believe that that flexible model would be best suited to a small country like ours. It would be very much community based, with shared facilities, and would reach out to elite and grass-roots sports alike. That model would lend itself particularly well to partnership working as well as bringing perhaps two, three or four sports together in one facility. It would open up better use of facilities that are owned or managed largely by clubs themselves, schools or local councils and provide up-to-date, high-standard changing accommodation, training areas, club rooms, etc. Integrated and programme-led facilities would bring much buy-in from every sector.

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

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé breá sásta labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin. I am very pleased to speak in favour of the motion.

Like others, I have a long association with sports clubs, particularly in an administrative rather than active role of late. First and foremost, I pay tribute to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who, with the smallest departmental budget, has shown absolute and unfaltering support and assistance to all sports and their development. That has been evident and recognised in the debate.

When the draft motion came to the Committee, there was, I think, reference to "elite sports" and "minority sports". I am not keen on either of those two terms because I do not think they are fair. The terminology should perhaps be "mainstream sports" and "grass-roots sports" or, indeed, "other sports". As we know,

mainstream sports account for some 93% of all spectator sports in this area. They are often referred to as the "big three". However, the reality on the ground is that the big three are made up of many clubs that, day and daily, struggle to survive after they have paid all of their outgoings.

Back in November, there was a discussion about the legacy of the Olympic Games. It is certainly welcome that the new 50-metre pool is to open in Bangor next month. I understand that the Committee will visit it just a few days before it opens. I very much look forward to that visit. The pool is part of the physical infrastructure and legacy of the games. More importantly, perhaps, is the Minister's recent announcement of boxing funding of £3.2 million. Again, I congratulate her for coming forward with that. I know that it has made a great difference to a number of small boxing clubs. I speak from experience. One of my local boxing clubs has been able to produce some of the best and greatest champions that this part of world has produced, including Eamonn O'Kane, who captained the Commonwealth team in Delhi in 2010.

The Minister has also been very much to the fore in recognising some of the minor sports, such as kick-boxing. That, too, is to be welcomed. Our consultation in November certainly threw up some interesting statistics in respect of the problems that clubs might have, such as funding and the provision of development officers, training facilities and equipment. I think of a local archery club near me. To kit yourself out with a bow and all the rest of it costs somewhere in the region of £2,000, a not inconsiderable sum in the current climate.

5.00 pm

Travel and insurance are also major costs for a lot of smaller clubs. There are issues of regulation and legislation. As the Chair said, there is a lack of visibility and sponsorship. Ms Lo said — and this may be critical to any new delivery of sport facilities — that all sport facilities should now be multi-sports facilities. That should be taken into account at design stage. That has been done very much in the development of the new Casement, Windsor and Ravenhill stadia. There must be total buy-in at local government level to provide that. There has not been in the past. We should certainly encourage it, and I hope that the Minister will do so.

The Sport Matters strategy 2009-2019 contains very interesting statistics on the various

statuses of the targets: six have already been achieved, 16 are on track for achievement, and four are on track with some delay. None is at risk. I welcome that very much.

I call on the Minister to continue her sterling work to date. Tacaím leis an rún.

Mr Humphrey: I support the motion. Those of us who have an interest in sport will realise and accept that sport has united the people of Northern Ireland during the worst of the Troubles. Other Members have made mention of the 22 sports representatives who came to the stakeholder event in November. During that event, I spoke to a number of people from minority sports who had mixed views on whether the legacy from the Olympics and Paralympics last year in London would have a benefit for their sport in Northern Ireland. The sports that were represented at the games felt that there would be a positive. However, for sport in general, the Olympics and Paralympics — those great events that lifted this nation — will be of significant benefit to all sport, not just the sports that took part in them.

One example is when England successfully won the Ashes a number of years ago and took them from Australia before retaining them. Andrew Flintoff England cricket shirts outsold David Beckham's England shirts in sports shops across the United Kingdom. That was an example of a minority sport eclipsing a majority sport, and probably the nation's national sport. The people who were here from the minority sports felt that a lack of finance, funding and investment was a serious issue. One of them commented to me that small and moderate amounts of money can actually make a difference to sports. One example is a sport in which I have an involvement: cricket.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member and I share a common issue in relation to cricket clubs, particularly with the Member's club of Woodvale Cricket Club. In my constituency, North Down Cricket Club has a particular issue with fencing around its facility. The Minister has been made aware of that. A very small amount of money could make a huge difference for the sustainability of both those clubs, which reside in residential areas. Like the Member, I hope for a positive response from the Minister on those issues.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I agree entirely. I declare an interest as a member of Woodvale Cricket Club. An investment to provide nets, which would prevent the ball visiting gardens and back windows of houses close by, would be of great advantage.

Another example of a minority sport that would benefit from some investment from regional government and local councils is, of course, boxing. I have met representatives from Albert Foundry, Cairn Lodge and Midland boxing clubs in my constituency. I know that Belfast City Council — I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council — will have a boxing strategy. I know that the Minister has a boxing strategy. It is absolutely important, if not vital, that those strategies coalesce to ensure that there is no wastage and maximise the benefit to those sports.

We must be fair, though, to government, in terms of both direct rule Ministers and regional Administrations at Stormont. Very clearly, for a long time in this country, money had to be put into providing security and defending our streets from anarchy. Money could not go into sport facilities. We need to bear that in mind. Many sporting bodies really want to see a joined-up approach, and I think that the Assembly needs to work closely with them on that. I believe that, by working with schools, universities, education and library boards, councils and private clubs, we can deliver that joined-up approach.

I want to use the example of Windsor Park, the national stadium for the Northern Ireland football team. Investment there means that there will be a new stadium and a home for the Irish Football Association (IFA), Linfield Football Club and the IFA's museum. If there was to be a joining up and meshing of Belfast City Council's facilities in the area there would be a new leisure centre, swimming pool, 3G pitches and, of course, that would also bring in Boucher Road Playing Fields. Apart from those facilities it would also open a type of Wembley Way — or Windsor Way — on Boucher Road. There would also be a centre of excellence for football with shared costs for the council and government.

Budgetary constraints in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), a small Department with a relatively modest budget, mean that a joined-up approach to our provision of sports facilities is vital. The national Government, local councils, education and library boards, universities, private clubs and funders like the National Lottery all need to

work together. If we are to maximise facilities, increase participation and recognition for sports, and improve the health of our young people and the wider community, it is absolutely essential that we produce elite athletes as well as well-meaning participants in activities. A collaborative approach, and only a collaborative approach, will enable us to get to the point where we can deliver.

Realistically, we will only have the 10 proposed elite facilities we are looking for across the sports in Northern Ireland if we have a joined-up approach, with local councils working with national and regional government. If there is to be a governmental shake-up, DCAL may no longer exist. It cannot be expected to provide the funding for this. We have to be realistic with our approach to the provision of sporting facilities as we move forward.

For too long, the facilities for our spectators, even of the big three that people talk about, have not been as good as they should be.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Humphrey: We are now approaching those three sports having world-class facilities. I look forward to a newly enhanced Windsor Park for the green and white army.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I support the motion.

The motion refers to grass-roots and elite sports facilities, but it is important to remember that such facilities are part of a continuum and that they should feed into each other. The athletes who end up using elite facilities begin their careers at a grass-roots level, and the better the facilities at that level, the better the chance we have of producing athletes at an elite level. Likewise, the success of our elite athletes encourages more people to participate at a grass-roots level and encourages our young athletes to reach for the sky. Elite facilities are essential for our sportspeople who compete at the higher levels.

We have heard today about the benefits of sport, and they are well known. Interest and participation in sport are good for physical and mental health and general well-being. The community aspect of sport also supports social cohesion and focuses people of all ages in a community on something that is of common interest across the age groups. Increasing

participation in sports involves investment on the capital and revenue sides.

At a grass-roots level, strengthening club structures is an important aspect of increasing participation. Good club organisation and structures lead to improved funding, higher levels of volunteerism, better coaching and modern facilities. All these together attract more members. Professional backup from a governing body in the form of full-time officers supports the development of the club. Sport NI's Clubmark and the GAA's Club Maith give direction, support and backup.

Volunteer coaches have a very important role to play at club level at all age groups, from the youngest upwards. I thank all those who volunteer in sport as coaches, administrators and in other roles. The Active Communities programme, which funds some 120 coaches on the ground based on the 11-council model, is a five-year programme that is funded by the National Lottery. Schemes such as Active Communities are good for grass-roots sport. They get to the athletes on the ground and help and support their participation, training and skill development.

Earlier, the Chair spoke about the stakeholder event in the Long Gallery. She outlined the issues that came out of that, and I will not dwell on those. However, as other Members have said, DCAL does not have the resources to achieve everything that we want to through sport, including the facilities. We have some evidence of joined-up government around sport. We obviously have contributions from the lead Department — the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure — from the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Health Department. The Department of Education contributes a large amount, and I want to refer to its huge sporting estate. Mr McNarry attempted to deal with that issue through his private Member's Community Use of Schools Bill. Unfortunately, the Bill did not advance beyond its Second Stage, but the Department gave an undertaking that this issue would be dealt with. That does not seem to have been the case, to this point anyway.

There are good examples of local government and the Department of Education co-operating, as in the facilities at St Colman's College in Newry and St Patrick's High School in Keady, to name but a couple. The facilities there are used by pupils during the day and they are open to the community in the evening. That type of joined-up co-operation is, I think, part of the way forward. Sport is a universal language across nations. I believe that it should be a universal language across —

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

Mr D Bradley: — all Departments here. I would like to see a dialogue opening up where greater funding is made available to the —

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

Mr D Bradley: — Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure to provide the type of facilities that we need and are outlined in the motion.

Mr Allister: In part, this motion looks forward to future Olympics. Of course, we do that from the perspective of a very successful 2012 Olympics in and for the United Kingdom, for which I hope that we are all grateful.

Looking forward to future Olympics brings to mind, though, an issue that the House addressed over three months ago, on 12 November. That was the difficulty that many athletes and citizens of Northern Ireland find in respect of their inability to compete on behalf of the nation to which they belong and wish to belong; namely, the United Kingdom.

On the specific issue of the sport of boxing, the House passed a resolution calling for a Northern Ireland federation of boxing to be formed to open up the pathway to participation in our own national team — that of the United Kingdom — in future Olympics, so that boxers from Northern Ireland could have that option. Has the Minister taken any steps to advance that cause? Indeed, has the Committee taken any steps to advance that cause? Or is it something that it is hoped will simply be forgotten? Perhaps we could hear something on that.

We had, of course, the funding situation for boxing. However, the discriminatory distribution thereof by the Minister, who, although she was all over the place with her answers, seemed, for obvious reasons, to insist that it came down to this: if you were not an affiliate of the all-Ireland Irish Amateur Boxing Association, you were excluded from funding. That was a deliberate and calculated —

5.15 pm

Mr McMullan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Are we wandering off the motion here when we use words like "discriminatory", which was in that last statement by the Member for North Antrim? Is he way off the wall altogether, and will he stay on the motion?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member may not be way off the wall, but he is certainly getting there, and I encourage him to return to the motion.

Mr Allister: I am sure, Mr Deputy Speaker, that you are very grateful to the Member for East Antrim for wanting to help you to do your job, but I am sure that you are more than capable of doing the job yourself.

The point is very relevant when one is talking about "funding towards grass-root sports". Boxing is a grass-root sport. The motion addresses "funding towards grass-root sports", so it is wholly pertinent to ask where the funding is going and why. Of course, in the context of the suggestion that there has been discrimination in the distribution of that funding by the imposition of a knowingly politically sensitive hurdle for boxing clubs —

Mr McMullan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is getting ridiculous. The Member is using this debate as a political platform to push his agenda on boxing. He had his opportunity to discuss that here in a previous debate. He is still using the words "discrimination" and "knowingly". That has nothing whatsoever to do with the motion before us.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I caution the Member that he is coming dangerously close to questioning the Chair. I believe that I am quite capable of doing the job. Again, I encourage Members to stay to the motion. The motion is about funding.

Mr Allister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, but if we did want to talk about discrimination in sport, which would be germane to the motion, we could of course point out that, since the Minister came to office, she has appointed to Sport NI 10 individuals from a Catholic background and four from a Protestant background. We could point out that, although she has had 71 applications from those from a Catholic background and 70 applications from those from a Protestant background for ministerial appointments —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Allister: If you are Catholic, you have twice the chance —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Allister: — of being appointed under this Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. The Member will resume his seat. The Member is now totally out of order. I ask the Member, in the last few seconds available to him, to conclude and speak to the motion.

Mr Allister: I trust that, in sport, we will see the Minister leave her bigotry and her inclinations in that regard to one side —

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

Mr Allister: — and deal with sport as it ought to be dealt with.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Choiste as an seans an rún seo a phlé. I thank the members of the Committee for tabling the motion. I believe that everyone who has spoken — bar the Member who spoke last — has done so in the spirit of the motion and made very relevant points.

From the outset, as we are on the subject of athletes from here competing in major international tournaments, I would like to take this opportunity again to congratulate Marty Irvine, who won gold and silver medals last week at the World Track Championships in Belarus.

I will also take the opportunity to recognise the Alpine skiers Ryan Hill, Rosalind Connolly and Lucy Best, who between them won one gold, two silver and two bronze medals at the Special Olympics World Winter Games in South Korea, and whom I had the pleasure of meeting last week at an event organised by Special Olympics Ireland. I also congratulate Kelly Gallagher, a partially sighted athlete, on winning bronze and silver medals at the IPC Alpine Skiing World Championships in Spain on 20 and 21 February. As David Hilditch pointed out, it seems that, on most days, we are hearing about sport in a positive way through celebrations but, certainly, through people's achievements.

I listened very carefully to today's debate and noted all of the Members' comments and some of their arguments. The Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure's motion relates directly to one of the targets under the places pillar of my strategy for sport and physical recreation, PL 23. As Karen McKevitt pointed out, that seeks

to have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities by 2014 that will support players and athletes in the development of Olympic and Paralympic sports.

At the start of the debate, the Chairperson of the Committee talked about the genuine and lasting legacy of the London 2012 Olympics and Paralympics. Several Members mentioned a stakeholder event that took place in September 2012. That event looked in particular at a focused review of the Sports Matters strategy, as well as at gaps in funding and elite sports, and at training funding for sports.

Sometimes it comes down to having to make choices between competing or travelling. It also sometimes comes down to not being able, for example, to attract events because of the condition of some of our facilities. I know that other Members, not just those who sit on the Committee, such as Danny Kinahan, also mentioned that.

I think that, for us, boxing is a contradiction. It has some of the worst sports facilities, yet it produces more medals across the board. However, that does not mean to say that the situation is good enough. It is far from good enough, and we need to look at some of the smaller sports' capital and revenue needs, because, as mentioned, a small investment can go a long way.

There was a hint at looking at having a velodrome after Marty Irvine's success. I will raise that with my counterpart Michael Ring when I meet him soon. We may need to look at a multiple sports facility that athletes across the island can use. The idea of having a velodrome in County Down or elsewhere was tested previously, but the business case did not stand up. Perhaps we can do something that will mean that athletes will have to travel by car or bus for only a couple of hours rather than having to get on a plane, which, again, is an added expense.

We do need to look at high-performance facilities, particularly for elite athletes. We also need to look at coaching and mentoring, and at the lack of visibility. We need to look at the visibility and recognition of volunteers, coaches and administrators, which many Members mentioned.

Rosie McCorley said that success begets success. That is very clear. However, it is not just about what we see in the Olympics on television. Indeed, this afternoon, our first item of business was about Marty. It is about

greater participation and encouraging physical activity, as well as yielding success in sport. It is about making sure that we make the best use of our facilities.

I am not too far from you, Danny. If I am not watching sport by invitation, I watch a lot of it on television or listen to it on the radio. I understand and appreciate the power of sport for health and the economy, as well as from the point of view of education, safety and health and well-being across the board. There are many overlaps, but I am pleased to say that, in my short time in the Department, I have seen that some of the gaps between Departments have been plugged.

I believe that sport and health and physical activity are Executive priorities. Different Departments are doing their bit towards trying to achieve better health and well-being. That can only be good. I can see that the sports monitoring group (SMG), which looks after the strategy, has produced better cohesion and collaboration across the board. It looks at local government, Departments, sporting bodies and sporting fora. However, I can also see that happening among my Executive colleagues. For example, there is more joined-up working between my Department and DSD than there was previously, and there is better joined-up work with the Health Department and the Department of Education, which is all to the good.

Karen McKeivitt pointed to the positive impact that there has been on getting facilities in her constituency. I appreciate that, despite political differences, other Members have recognised that, although DCAL has the smallest budget, it has looked at investment in diverse ways. We have to be smarter about that investment.

To every Member who raised the point, I give a commitment to do that.

As I said, I made additional money available for the big-three sports to look at nutrition, kids who are excluded and kids who have never been involved in any sport. As Dominic pointed out, we have to invest somewhere in the journey from grass roots to elite. We are not looking at the big-three sports in respect of just the sports that they are involved in. Kids may be athletic or involved in archery or other sports. We hope that the good offices of the IFA, rugby and the GAA will have the sense, skills and expertise to forward kids who are not involved in their sports somewhere else. That is a condition of the funding, and I am happy for that to happen.

I did not see the amendment that you referred to, Anna. I do not mean this in a bad way, but I think that there is a bit of naivety there. There are many more shared facilities than the Member gives the sports credit for. I know that you did not mean that begrudgingly, but there are. One of the best examples was when Linfield invited the Antrim camogs to use Windsor Park because they did not have enough facilities. That was not a cosmetic exercise. The relationship continued well beyond that.

There have been some mighty rows from mighty mouths in this place, such as what we heard from the previous Member to speak. They would like to make politics out of this. However, these things are happening in a very genuine way, and that will continue.

There is additional money for those sports and other sports. Unfortunately, the Department of Justice did not continue to fund midnight soccer, which was being funded from assets recovery. However, DCAL does fund that, because there are kids who, for all sorts of reasons, do not get an opportunity to be physically active until the evening, particularly those in socially deprived areas that are vulnerable to crime and poor mental health. I appreciate the sentiments, but a lot is being done. Many Members said that there is not enough visibility for some of the good work that goes on behind the scenes.

David Hilditch pointed out that there are huge challenges even with the development of stadia and grounds. Fixing or replacing that boiler could mean the cancellation of some coaching programmes or trips away. I understand that. It is not a good position to be in, but I understand it. I also understand his nervousness about creating an environment in which there is a gap between those who have and those who have not. That is not what any of us is about. I do not think that any of us is about elite anything.

Cathal Ó hOisín made the point that I have just made about the three big sports. He also pointed out the power of talking to people and, in particular, the stakeholder event that happened in September 2012. William Humphrey talked about his own constituency and took an intervention on cricket from the Committee Chair. It is true that a small investment goes a long way. In that case, it sounds as though good fences will make good neighbours. Such investment means having a relationship with the people who live around you, so it is important to have a look at that.

I met boxers from Cairn Lodge and other clubs on Friday night in Dublin. Despite the ongoing accusations, the boxing fraternity enjoys a lot of support. That is why it got the money that it did. The conditions for some clubs were atrocious. I refute the allegation of discrimination that the Member for North Antrim has made against me on an ongoing basis. I am not challenging the Chair — I just want that read into the record. I think that it is really unfair. I take my section 75 duty very seriously. I implement all my resources in accordance with section 75.

As regards the accusation that the Member keeps repeating, as I have said to him before, he needs to put up or shut up. He is not doing a good service to the boxing family. Sandy Row boxing club, like any other club, can apply for funding as long as it is affiliated. That has not changed since I last spoke. Despite the Member's protests, I have still not received a request from him to try to get this sorted out. I assume that he is just being a complete diva and using this opportunity to raise an issue that, in reality, he has done nothing about.

I welcome —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will not. I have heard enough from you.

I welcome the motion. The Committee has done a lot to support grass-roots and elite facilities. I welcome the debate. I will take on board what Members have said and the suggestions to look at the research paper and the Scottish model. During the debate, Members have voiced support for all volunteers, coaches, administrators, governing bodies, and athletes and their families. It has also, yet again, raised the whole area of sport in a very positive way. I support the motion.

5.30 pm

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank all Members who have spoken in the debate. The motion is about an important issue, and I am glad that Members have involved themselves. As the Committee Chairperson highlighted so clearly at the start of the debate, the Committee is keen that the achievements of London 2012 — the Olympic and Paralympic Games — provide a lasting legacy for all our sportspeople. The Committee has looked at that issue since the end of the games and has involved a range of sports in its discussions on how to cement that legacy.

We are all delighted that sportspeople from Northern Ireland did so well in both the Olympic and Paralympic Games. It is also worth noting that our successes were not in the sports that receive the lion's share of the funding here, namely football, GAA and rugby. They were in other sports, such as rowing and boxing. In my own constituency, a young man called Ryan Hill recently competed in the Special Olympics Winter Games in South Korea and returned to Northern Ireland with two silver medals. That is on top of five other medals that he has received in recent times.

As Members have heard, the Committee has worked closely with sports other than the big three to see how they can benefit from the legacy of the games and what they may need to do to ensure that participants might one day find themselves competing in the Olympics or Paralympics. The Committee Chair outlined that the Minister has put in place additional funding for football, GAA and rugby. However, the Committee's motion is designed to focus the minds of the Minister and Members on what we need to do for other sports. Those sports might not appear on our TVs so often, and they may not attract the numbers of supporters that the big three enjoy. However, given a little bit of investment, it is likely that they could significantly raise their profile and make a tremendous contribution to our community and to the lives of participants.

The Chairperson referred to the Sport Matters strategy and its targets. The Committee learned in the past couple of weeks that the targets for the upgrading of venues have been achieved, but we are aware that, in some cases, plans have been approved but not actioned. Members will be aware of countless sporting clubs in their constituencies that suffer from poor or inadequate equipment and facilities. In many cases, those clubs would see real benefits from an investment of even a few thousand pounds.

With today's motion, the Committee wants to encourage the Minister to spread the funding a bit more across a greater number of sports. We are not saying that she should not continue to support the big three. However, they have access to commercial funding that smaller grass-roots sports do not. Talented participants in other sports may not be able to fulfil their potential without the proper environment and competitive training. It is important that we assess their needs and that the Minister is creative with the funding that is available. As the Chairperson has said, the Committee encourages the Minister to make additional bids for funding in monitoring rounds.

The Committee Chairperson mentioned the World Police and Fire Games, which take place this August and are being hosted in Belfast. Those games represent a significant profile boost for Northern Ireland. The Committee is keen that we make sure that we are well placed to bid for other games. That will not happen unless we can show that we have the appropriate facilities. The beauty of the World Police and Fire Games is that many of the events do not require elaborate venues or stadia, but that is generally not the case for other events.

As the Chairperson has stressed, the Committee is extremely mindful of the pressures on the Minister's budget. However, we call for smaller sports not to be overlooked when the Minister is considering her investment plans. The Chairperson highlighted that a number of sports have indicated the need for indoor facilities, and the Committee believes that, in some cases, there is an opportunity for facilities to be shared, maximising their utilisation and the benefits they bring. The Minister is more than aware of the benefits that sports bring when it comes to social inclusion and health, and better sports facilities in our communities will encourage more people to participate, with the added benefit of new talent being discovered.

As the Chairperson said, we must expect councils to play their full part. However, there is no reason why the Minister cannot work with councils to bring forward plans to upgrade and enhance the sports facilities that we have. That would be an excellent example of the kind of joined-up government that we are always being asked to undertake.

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on some of the points made by Members who spoke today. Ms McCorley commended our Olympic and Paralympic competitors on their successes, which she believes will inspire ordinary people to participate in future. She also referred to sport's health and well-being elements. Mr Kinahan focused on the benefits of sports for communities and health and well-being, and he called for joined-up government to make funding go further.

Mrs McKevitt highlighted the necessity of having good facilities. Again, she reflected on the health and well-being aspect of sports. Anna Lo called for shared facilities and commented that sport can break down barriers and bring people together. David Hilditch acknowledged the small DCAL budget and the difficulties that that had caused. He praised the volunteers at grass-roots level.

Mr Bradley reiterated the importance of sport for health and well-being and spoke about how it brings people together. Mr Ó hOisín commented on the Minister's work on sport and talked about issues around terminology. He welcomed the 50-metre pool at Bangor. William Humphrey spoke about the lack of investment being an issue and said that small amounts of money can make a big difference.

Jim Allister highlighted the achievements of the London Olympics. He also highlighted the issue of sports participants not being able to compete for the UK and questioned what the Committee had done in relation to that. The Committee has met the boxing federation, the Minister and the Irish Amateur Boxing Association on the issue.

I thank all those who made such useful contributions to the debate and encourage them to support the motion. I support the motion and commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the target in the Sport Matters strategy to have a minimum of 10 new or upgraded facilities by 2014 that will support player and athlete development in Olympic and Paralympic sports; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to consider prioritising funding towards grass-root sports and elite facilities from within her existing budget, to ensure that our sportspeople competing in future Olympic and Commonwealth Games are not disadvantaged as a result of lack of investment.

Private Members' Business

Agrifood: Graduate Programmes

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

Mr Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the importance of the agrifood sector to the Northern Ireland economy; believes that this sector has the potential for significant growth in the future; recognises the need for graduates in this area and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to promote graduate programmes in this sector, particularly within our two universities.

I am glad to see that the Minister is here to listen to this very important debate. This issue cuts across the remit of several Departments and agencies, but our primary focus today is on the role of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) — I am the Deputy Chairperson of that Committee — and that of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) — I am also a member of that Committee.

On 18 February, we had an important debate in the House on sustainable energy. In his speech, my colleague Mr Stephen Moutray emphasised the importance of creating high-value-added jobs in that sector. His line of argument was that we need to have people who are suitably educated and skilled so that the expanding sustainable energy sector can be a growth area for business.

The same logic underpins the motion before us this evening. Agriculture is one of the oldest industries and is still one of our main industries. Northern Ireland is more economically dependent on agriculture than any other region of the UK. Like all other businesses, the agriculture industry has had its good times and its bad times, and, like all other businesses, it has to adapt to changing circumstances or it will fall into sharp decline.

Food and drink is Ulster's largest industry and employs almost 30% of our total manufacturing workforce. Figures released last December

show that it is worth almost £4 billion to our economy. Taken together, the agriculture and the food and drink industries account for a very significant share of our GDP and are, therefore, key economic drivers.

The agrifood sector is of great importance to the UK economy and even more so to the Northern Ireland economy. It is the largest contributor to sales, external sales and employment in our manufacturing sector. It is recognised in our economic strategy as one of our priority sectors, and, in that strategy, there is a commitment to develop the industry.

Let us note as well that our small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are often family-run businesses, have been the very backbone of our economy over the years and account for a large percentage of the agrifood sector. The sector, from the farm to the manufacturing plant to the retailer, has tremendous potential. It provides our agriculture industry, our wider manufacturing industries and our local retail sector with wonderful opportunities to develop and expand, and the agrifood industry is one of the keys to our economic recovery.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

The current crisis and scandal in the meat industry, which has sent shock waves across the nation and beyond, is already having a major impact on the food industry. This is a pivotal moment in the history of food manufacturing and processing. The drama is still unfolding, and who knows where it will end. They always say that it is an ill wind that blows no good, for the crisis can, in a way, work to the advantage of our local agrifood industry. That has been illustrated in recent weeks by the increase in customer footfall in local butchers' shops. We have a high-quality product and excellent traceability and tracking systems in place, and we now have an opportunity to market our local product with renewed confidence and determination, not only in Northern Ireland, the United Kingdom and Europe but in markets right across the world and in countries such as China, Brazil, Russia and India.

However, if we are to succeed in the weeks, months and years to come, we must address the broader needs of the agrifood industry in a strategic and forward-looking manner. We need to be ahead of the game in research and development, innovation, and driving and targeting our export strategy. We must be able to adapt to changing customer habits, global demographics and health trends, and, bearing

in mind that we still import a large percentage of our food, a fact that has been highlighted by the horse meat scandal, we need to remember that there is scope for us to produce more for the home market. We can act decisively to enhance the profitability of our local food chain.

There are several things that we can do to encourage our agrifood industry to achieve those key goals. The motion recognises not only the importance of the industry but the importance of ensuring its medium- to long-term viability and competitiveness. It identifies a central need and a pool of suitable graduates who will set standards and lead the industry forward at the various levels that I referred to earlier. Much has already been done and is being done to ensure the development of the sector in that way, and we warmly welcome that.

The Agri-Food Strategy Board has a major role to play, and it is pleasing to note that the food and drink manufacturing and processing future skills action group has reached agreement with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the universities to put specific courses in place over the next three years to fill gaps in the sector. The action group's three-year plan is designed to improve the management and leadership skills of employees in the food and drink sector and includes efforts at increasing awareness of careers in the area by informing schools, teachers and pupils about the range of job opportunities.

5.45 pm

The Minister for Employment and Learning recently announced an increase in the number of students enrolling at our local universities, but let us ensure that, when they emerge as graduates, they do so with the knowledge base and skills to enable them to compete for high value-added jobs in the marketplace, including the agrifood sector. Invest NI and others must also do everything possible to ensure that these are secure, well-paid and rewarding jobs in that sector. I know that courses in STEM subjects and related subjects such as food quality, safety and nutrition are oversubscribed at our universities and at CAFRE. In a way, this is a good problem to have, and every effort must be made by the universities and the college to develop their curricula in this area to focus on the provision of the right courses and, very importantly, to liaise closely with the industry to ensure that its requirements are met.

Earlier, I mentioned the good work of the skills action group. I also urge the Minister for

Employment and Learning to work closely with the universities on all these issues, and I urge the Agriculture Minister to work closely with CAFRE. The Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association stated that there are important skills gaps to be tackled. Areas where there are such gaps include marketing and senior management skills and the need for greater knowledge and understanding of animal nutrition. I have no doubt that other Members will draw attention to other gaps and other areas where there are weaknesses.

The debate has come at the right time. The agrifood industry faces many challenges, but it also faces many opportunities. Let us be sure to meet the challenge and to grasp the opportunities. One way to do that is to ensure a good supply of graduates who will lead the way. I urge the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to work closely on these issues. Let us not be found wanting when it comes to these matters but let us ensure that all that can be done is being done to provide graduate programmes in the sector, particularly in our two universities, so that we have the graduates who are needed and that we have the qualifications that will bridge the gap and which will fill the demand in the sectors. We will still be at the cutting edge and leading for Northern Ireland. I urge the House to give its full support to the motion.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the motion. As was outlined by the previous Member who spoke, the local agrifood industry has demonstrated in recent years that it remains one of the more resilient sectors in our local economy. Indeed, it is recording growth at a time when many other sectors are experiencing great difficulty. Without doubt, one of the great drivers of growth and vitality in any sector is increased innovation and skills, and this has been the case with our local agrifood sector. However, we must not grow idle in the shade of recent success in this regard. As outlined by many commentators, including the industry itself, we need to constantly invest in the skills base in the agrifood sector.

With this in mind, the recent announcement by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development of a food innovation centre at Loughry is to be greatly welcomed as a huge step in the right direction. In light of the central role of the agrifood sector to our local economy, I doubt whether £1.8 million of government money has been better spent in the lifetime of this Assembly. Hopefully to be finished in the next two years, the food innovation centre will

come as a major addition to the existing facilities at Loughry, bringing with it significant advancements in product development, package design and quality control laboratories. Not only will it provide much-needed jobs during the construction phase but it will meet the growing employment demands of the agrifood sector for decades to come by providing established and start-up companies with the technical staff needed to grow their business. In tandem with CAFRE's existing reputation for excellence, the new food innovation centre will, no doubt, act as a hub for future innovation and will help to facilitate new technologies and the successful exploitation of emerging market opportunities.

In welcoming the innovation centre at Loughry, it is perhaps salient to acknowledge the role of CAFRE in general in sustaining the recent growth in our agrifood sector. With campuses at Loughry, Greenmount and Enniskillen, CAFRE continues to grow and has, in fact, risen by some 20% in the past number of years, with more than 1,600 students enrolled in courses currently. Central to DARD's development of skills in the agrifood sector, CAFRE has a business-development focus, with its education and training targeted to those who seek to work in the local industry. A huge attribute of the existing arrangements is the provision of industry-led training, with alterations to course content made only following consultation with the advisory group and industry stakeholders, delivering a wide variety of programmes in agriculture, horticulture, food, equine, and rural enterprise. All CAFRE courses are externally accredited, and graduates are, no doubt, held in high esteem. In fact, last year's figures show that 91% of CAFRE students surveyed six months after they graduated were in employment or continuing their education in postgraduate research. Those are quite remarkable statistics. Furthermore, when you consider that the local figure for youth unemployment is nearly 19%, it is fitting that the House acknowledges the sterling work that CAFRE and DARD are doing, not only in sustaining our local agrifood industry but in driving it forward to capitalise on market opportunities.

In addition to the soaring success of CAFRE, the recent investment in improved innovation and research in the agrifood sector is vital in equipping our local industry with the skills needed to respond successfully to market demand. With tens of millions of pounds spent in recent years through DARD's evidence and innovation strategy, our improved research facilities and expertise now give us an

opportunity to access new European research funding that was not possible in years gone by.

To enable local industry to access those funds within the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle O'Neill, recently announced that she would fund a local EU research funding facilitator to support local businesses and researchers in the area of food science. Bearing in mind that DARD's annual spend on agrifood research is close to £10 million, I believe that the new EU-focused post will add greatly to DARD's strategy of upskilling local businesses and will, no doubt, contribute greatly to the development of innovation in the local industry. It is important to bear in mind that skills gaps can have serious, detrimental implications for localised economic growth. So, unless there is a continued determination from all Ministers and Departments concerned to match the positive steps already taken by the Agriculture Minister to address shortages in innovation and science-specific skills, the health of our agrifood industry could be vulnerable in the long term.

Finally, a point worth mentioning is the tangible need for Departments to create and support a regulatory environment that nurtures increased growth in our agrifood industry. One of the main obstacles to creating and expanding businesses in rural communities is planning difficulties, as well as other deficits in infrastructure and services. In my South Down constituency, local industry has been crying out for years for infrastructural improvements, such as the Ballynahinch bypass, not to mention the complete failure of politicians and agencies alike to address gridlock in our county town of Downpatrick.

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

Mr Hazzard: Such gridlock has come to characterise the ongoing failure to address the lack of investment in the area. Indeed, the 3,500 public sector workers who commute to Belfast daily account for the most commuter miles a year of any district outside the greater Belfast area.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Hazzard: If our local agrifood industry is to continue to expand, and —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Hazzard: — I have no doubt that it will, we must ensure that we facilitate and nurture an environment —

Mr Speaker: The Members time has gone.

Mr Hazzard: Thank you.

Mrs Dobson: As the Ulster Unionist Party's agriculture spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. An issue that I believe will unite all sides of the House is the fact that enrolment at the CAFRE colleges is at an all-time high. That is proof, if we needed it, that more and more people want to learn about farming and take up a career in our agrifood industry. They want to enter an industry that has a massive potential for growth and a bright future. I believe that this is healthy and to be warmly welcomed — unlike some of the food served in the college canteens, of course.

DARD, therefore, has a duty to direct its efforts and resources to that future, a future in which our young farmers take up the reins when their time comes. Entrusting farmers with the right tools to do that will provide a future for our young farmers and their families for generations to come. Once their studies are complete, young farmers and those progressing to further, higher and graduate study, need to have the confidence that there will be a job there for them. Sadly, the recent news of falling farm incomes will not act as a magnet but will, I fear, deflect people from choosing farming as a career in the first place. This is bad news for an industry with massive potential for growth. Departments have a duty to put their collective shoulders to the wheel for the sake of the future success of the Northern Ireland economy. The green shoots of recovery are emerging from the agrifood industry. For the recovery to be sustained and for growth to continue, we need to upskill our workforce to meet the future challenges of the industry. Time and time again, Northern Ireland has been internationally recognised as having an extremely dynamic and adaptable workforce. That workforce has risen to meet the challenges of the past, and I firmly believe that, with the right support from the Executive, it can and will be ready for the challenges of the future.

One area where clear change is needed is the relationship between the recently merged six further and higher education colleges and the CAFRE colleges. The now stronger and resource-rich further education colleges are in a unique position to provide help and support to those who are taking courses in the agrifood

industry, not least in literacy and numeracy, which are areas that we have continually debated in the House. There must be massive potential to sweep away duplication of effort at all levels between further education colleges and the CAFRE colleges to lower costs while raising standards and to increase the geographical availability of agrifood-related courses so that they can be offered to a wider audience across Northern Ireland. That will ultimately lead to the delivery of improvements in academic attainment and in the learning experience for all our students. I would welcome the Minister for Employment and Learning's thoughts on the matter and his ideas on how greater working relationships can be fostered between further education colleges and the CAFRE colleges.

In making those comments, however, I am aware that, in reply to a question for written answer from my colleague Sandra Overend, the Minister recognised that skills gaps exist in the agrifood industry. Those include the shortage of food technologists and the need to raise leadership and management skills in the agrifood industry. Although we recognise the establishment of the skills action plan for food and drink manufacturing and processing, it does not go far enough to foster the level of co-operation that is necessary to raise standards.

There is also the need to provide fit-for-purpose careers advice and guidance to students who are attending the CAFRE colleges. Guidance will provide clear and seamless progression routes through to graduate courses at the universities. It is clear that the arrangements, albeit that they have been in place since the Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) 1949, which gave DARD the central authority to provide education and training for the agriculture sector, are no longer fit for purpose. The continuation of the split responsibility, which is clearly demonstrated in the motion, provides the underlying reason why the education of those who will form the future of our agrifood industry from the farm to the boardroom is being held back.

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

Mrs Dobson: It is, therefore, the responsibility of Departments to pool their resources, put their shoulders to the wheel and deliver for pupils who are studying agriculture at all levels. They are, after all, the future of the industry. We support the motion.

Mr Byrne: As agriculture spokesperson for the SDLP, I congratulate those who tabled the motion, and I support its sentiments and context.

The agrifood sector is a very significant and important part of the Northern Ireland economy, as it sustains over 92,000 people in employment. Over 19,000 of those are linked to food and drink processors, over 30,000 are in primary farm production, and those areas combined generate a further 43,000 jobs indirectly. That represents one quarter of all the manufacturing jobs in Northern Ireland and approximately 20% of the total private sector employment in Northern Ireland.

Despite the recession in other areas, the agrifood sector has grown and continues to show more growth. The world's population is growing by 1.5 million a week. Therefore, there is a market for more agricultural produce and food products from here. Between 1991 and 2011, the number of people who were employed on farms dropped by 13,000. However, that reflects that there are a smaller number of larger farmers. It is important that this agricultural produce has value added to sustain the industry and grow further. We now have a £4 billion industry and the potential to grow further.

Currently, we need to export 80% of our agricultural produce. That means that there is an opportunity that means that, with the right skills and graduates, more of our exports could result in higher-value-added products with more ongoing research and development.

The European Union 2020 R&D money is very important in that regard, and Mr Hazzard made reference to that.

6.00 pm

Queen's University has confirmed that, for the 2011-12 academic year, there were 474 applications for undergraduate degree courses offered by the university's Institute of Agri-Food and Land Use, with 85 students admitted on the course. For 2011-12 postgraduate entry, 49 applications were received for areas of research carried out by the institute, with six students enrolled, which, given the importance of the industry, is a relatively small number.

CAFRE has said that the employment rates for its students are high. Some 94% of Greenmount students were in employment within six months of completing their course. I

think that that is one of the few industries in which there is great growth potential for jobs.

In research carried out for a policy brief titled 'Innovation and Skills: Implications for the Agri-food Sector' by AFBI's agricultural and food economics branch, it was found:

"companies indicated that the constant factors driving their managers, supervisors, and specialist/technical/professional staff to acquire new skills were: (1) the need to introduce new technologies and equipment, and (2) the need to develop new products and services."

That all requires highly skilled and qualified employees.

Many companies also stressed the continued requirement for substantial funding assistance from government to support the improvement of training provision and skills levels across the sector, with a particular emphasis on specific scientific and technical training aimed to encourage process and product innovation. Mr Tony O'Neill, who is the chairman of the Agri-food Strategy Board, also stated that more government funding needs to be put into the training of people with expertise and research capabilities in the agrifood sector.

Companies say that, with increased competition from abroad, we need to ensure that we have well-qualified staff so that they can compete when it comes to skills and technology. Posts for production engineers and skilled and semi-skilled workers are hard to fill. Specific specialist and technical expertise were also identified as a key area of skills deficiency. It is clear that there is a greater need for highly qualified graduates and food technologists. There are jobs for them, but we do not have enough trained people at this stage.

Parity has helped CAFRE and DARD to attract graduates. Around 70% of those who complete their LEADER+ programme stay in the food and drink sector. The Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Farry, has said that it is for the universities to decide how many places will be available and what courses they will provide, but the universities should be given more funding to develop those areas when there is potential for jobs and growth.

For a long time, one big deficiency in Northern Ireland has been that we do not have a veterinary science course in any university in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr Byrne: That is a major deficiency when it comes to the further development of the red meat industry, and I hope that some serious research will be put into trying to get a veterinary science course in Northern Ireland.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party. One of the key pledges in our Assembly manifesto was to encourage an increase in the number of individuals holding STEM-related qualifications to help ensure that our workforce is capable of contributing to key growth areas in our economy. The agrifood sector is very much one of those key areas, and the food and drink sector and the agriculture industry are playing a crucial role in rebalancing and growing the Northern Ireland economy.

DARD estimates that the food and drink sector was worth nearly £4 billion to the region in 2012, and the value of gross output from the agriculture industry was put at £1.7 billion, so the importance of the agrifood sector cannot be overstated. As the motion states, the sector has the:

"potential for significant growth in the future".

To achieve that potential, we must provide the sector with the necessary skills for high-quality education and training. Our manifesto also committed to increasing the uptake in STEM-related subjects across all levels, from entry level to apprenticeship, technician, degree and higher degree. It is our view that growing areas such as the agrifood sector will be supported through that drive to improve STEM. Understanding and competency in STEM subjects are required to increase levels of research and development in Northern Ireland and to provide businesses with the skills to introduce innovation in their working practices.

Therefore, I welcome the additional 1,200 places for STEM-related programmes that the Minister for Employment and Learning pledged his Department will implement by 2015. I hope that extra places for courses associated with the agrifood sector will follow. The challenge is to ensure that those programmes provide future graduates with the relevant skills to forge successful careers in that area.

That will undoubtedly require collaboration between the Agriculture Department and the Department for Employment and Learning, alongside educational institutions that deliver

the programmes and stakeholders in the agrifood sector, to ensure that we can produce an excellent knowledge and skill base in those areas. One platform for achieving that will, I hope, be DEL's future skills action group for food and drink manufacturing and processing — a group set up in conjunction with the Agriculture Department and Invest NI that includes stakeholders from the industry, employers and further and higher education institutions. The group seems to be a useful vehicle for developing what we can offer in this area.

In addition to those educational programmes, our universities can play further roles in assisting the sector through delivering assistance with product development, providing rural and agricultural policy development or advice, and undertaking applied research connected to the field. Our universities have an excellent reputation for world-leading research. I hope that they will develop their partnerships with the agrifood sector.

I reaffirm the Alliance Party's commitment to supporting our agrifood sector and increasing the education and training associated with the industry to further acknowledge that this is a developing and vital part of our economy. I call for a joined-up approach between the bodies and organisations involved to ensure that we provide degree programmes for future graduates that help them to create world-class careers and results in agrifood in Northern Ireland.

Mr Irwin: If the current horse meat scandal has proved one thing, it is the absolute importance of our local agrifood industry. Food is something that everyone needs and no one can do without. In recent weeks, the revelations about how food is processed, what is added and how it can be traced, tested and verified, have made consumers sit up and take a greater interest in what they are eating.

Consumers can, of course, rest very assured when they eat our own locally produced food that they are eating the very highest-quality produce, which is subject to the most stringent traceability and testing in Europe. Although we farmers moan and groan about paperwork and red tape — there is, of course, far too much of it — for once, perhaps, that has set us apart in a positive fashion from some of our EU neighbours. Our agrifood sector continues to farm well in a climate of economic pressure. That is, in no small part, due to the efforts of our innovative agrifood industry and the endless efforts of those who seek to add value to our locally produced food.

Innovation is a key driver for growth in the agrifood sector. That has been clearly identified by the Assembly, and the UK Government on a wider scale, as a core focus for economic improvement. The need to strengthen the private sector to help rebalance the public sector is recognised. Encouraging growth in agrifood must be an absolute focus for the Executive, given the opportunities that the sector presents.

There are many success stories of local firms having invested significantly in adding value to local produce. In doing so, they have created very appetising products that are sold worldwide. Investing time, money and effort in creating products, finding new markets, and selling our creativity and image internationally as the home of great taste is an undertaking of immense proportions. However, that is being done successfully, and we need to build on that work.

There is no doubt that the input of our graduates is key to the longer-term growth of the sector. I welcome the announcement of the DEL Minister last year that there will be a campaign to make teachers and young people more aware of the career opportunities in the sector. I am interested to hear from Dr Farry about his progress on that important initiative.

I studied a number of reports compiled by agencies relevant to our food industry, and it was clear that more work is required to help maximise the opportunities that will be presented over the next 10 years in supplying domestic and global demand for food. I know that the food industry and agriculture industry are very competitive marketplaces. In the light of that reality, we are punching above our weight locally in terms of innovation and the marketing of our produce further afield.

The domestic and global marketplace is growing steadily. With climate issues in a number of countries affecting the production of food, Northern Ireland and, indeed, the UK will have even greater opportunities to meet the demand, but only if the correct support is in place. I acknowledge that a number of programmes are in place, such as DARD's postgraduate research awards and the skills action plan. We can take pride in the excellent standards that are achieved at our agriculture and food technology institutions. However, if we are to truly realise the sector's potential, we must do more to effectively equip our graduates to enter the workplace and advance the industry, and ensure that we grasp the opportunities that are out there. I support the motion.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the work that has been done to date by the Employment and Learning Minister and the Agriculture Minister.

As has already been said, the agrifood industry is one of the most important employers and one of the more resilient sectors of our local economy. It is a billion-pound industry. At present, more than 60% of the food and drink produced and processed in the North is destined for export. The agrifood sector supports one out of every five jobs in the private sector and employs 92,000 people. Food and drinks processors buy 90% of the local agricultural produce. The multiplier impacts of growth in the sector are considerable. We need to strive for the North to become strategically important as one of the key food-producing regions.

It has been stated that the agrifood sector is, of all the industries in the North, best placed to support rural employment and sustainability. The Agri-Food Strategy Board has been set up to look at how it can further improve turnover and create more jobs. That will be an important report when published.

There is potential for significant growth in the near future. There are export success stories from the North of Ireland's agrifood companies. In my constituency, Fivemiletown Creamery had a major contract win in Asia last year. The Programme for Government highlights an export-led economy as key to achieving sustainable economic growth. Success stories, such as that in Fivemiletown, point to the agrifood sector having a key role in achieving sustainable economic growth. Other success stories include Mash Direct and the Fermanagh-based Kettyle Irish Foods. However, the industry needs to be prepared. It is important to maintain and build upon all of that.

A policy brief prepared by the agriculture and food economics branch of AFBI highlighted the fact that companies expressed a greater need for engagement and synergy between further education colleges, universities and the industry in relation to the content, design and delivery of education programmes. Levels of skills are important in developing an innovation-led economy. According to 'The Economist' in 2012, it is suggested that:

"economies cannot sustain a model in which innovation is driven by a small number of trained elite and supported by a large body of ... low-skilled production workers."

Growing the North's economy is a key priority, with education and skills at the core of the policy agenda for supporting innovation.

A key weakness in the food and drinks industry is that it has more people of working age with no qualifications. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Employment and Learning has identified the food and drinks manufacturing and processing subsector as a priority for employment and skills provision. There is a skills gap, and it has been identified by employers: a shortage of food technologists and engineers, and management and leadership skills in the industry. That needs to be tackled, given the high rates of unemployment in the North. It is important that we maximise support for the sector.

I also welcome the proposal announced recently for the new food innovation centre at Loughry. Regarding the report yet to be published by the Agri-Food Strategy Board, it is pre-eminent that the skills and capacity of the workforce will form a major strand of its work and, hopefully, go some way towards addressing the skills shortage in the sector. More needs to be done to analyse and engage with the labour market.

6.15 pm

Finally, innovation comes with education. When the skills are there, it will help the industry to further grow and blossom. We need to be thinking progressively, as the agrifood sector is key to keeping the economy running. Education must reflect what the economy needs. I support the motion.

Mrs Overend: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion that has been brought forward by the DUP. I am pleased that the motion calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to act together. That highlights the cross-departmental working that is required if we are to succeed in making the best of our economic potential within the agrifood industry. You could easily add the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) to the mix, as it is so important to match the necessary skills with the relevant industry, but, perhaps, the DUP did not want to overly burden its Minister today.

I want to focus largely on the first part of the motion, which states the importance of the agrifood sector to the Northern Ireland economy, as well as the belief that the sector has the potential to achieve significant growth in

the future. The importance of the agriculture industry in its totality cannot be understated, as it makes a significant contribution to the Northern Ireland economy. It has an annual output of £1.5 billion and, when taken together with the production and processing industries, it is one of Northern Ireland's largest employers.

The agrifood sector sustains a vast amount of Northern Ireland's private sector workforce. It has also been one of the strongest performers of all sectors in our local economy in recent years. In that respect, it has played a huge role in supporting and sustaining the economy throughout the gloom of a double-dip recession.

The share of total gross value added (GVA) in the agriculture sector in Northern Ireland at 1.6% illustrates that dependence, when compared with 0.7% in Scotland and 0.5% in Wales. If we look at the DARD key statistics from June 2012, we can see the hard employment figures. To give just one example, we can see that there are 25,000 people directly employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, and 27,000 in food and drink and processing. That equates to around 6.5% of the total workforce. A report published by the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) shows that every job created in food and drink processing equates to 1.91 jobs in the regional economy. That is a great return.

We are all aware of the tremendous role that the agrifood sector plays in Northern Ireland, but it still has the potential for significant growth. First, we must continue to encourage people to buy local. In light of the recent horse meat scandal, I take this opportunity to put on record the fact that I have complete trust and confidence in our local quality assured beef. Naturally, having grown up on a dairy farm, I have always been a keen advocate for our local dairy products and local beef, but there is also scope to grow some of the lesser known subsectors under the umbrella of agrifood.

Currently, almost half of the gross turnover is provided in two areas: milk and milk-based products; and beef and sheep meat. We can work to grow our poultry meat sector, which, admittedly, will not be helped by the recent Rose Energy decision, and maximise income from such areas as fruit, vegetables and fish. I cannot forgo the opportunity to promote pork in the House, although I may need to express an interest, considering that my husband might benefit from it.

Opening up foreign markets for exports is also key, and I have said before in the House that we need a more ambitious export strategy. We

should be encouraging those in the agrifood sector to explore the options and opportunities available to them further afield. Knowledge and contacts are, of course, vital in that.

There is also the issue of skills, which the motion specifically deals with. The sector cannot grow without the necessary skills base, and our two universities are vital to that. I note that the future skills action plan for food and drink manufacturing and processing was tasked with advising, designing, developing and testing new interventions to meet existing and future skills needs within the sector. To be fair, that plan makes mention of schools, colleges and universities.

I had the pleasure of visiting and touring the food technology campus at Loughry. I found it most interesting to hear that those who have gone into that profession often find that they have a long and committed career in that field.

However, there is a specific need to increase graduate programmes. That needs to be rectified. Statistically, there are lower levels of graduates in the agrifood sector compared with other sectors. That trend must be reversed.

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

Mrs Overend: We must work to achieve a situation whereby more graduates choose to go into that sector and demand and supply is such that employers actually demand graduate-entry employees.

Mr Rogers: As a Member for South Down, I extend my sympathies to the Grant family on the tragic loss of their little son Daniel at the weekend. I am sure that the thoughts and prayers of the House are with them at this tragic time.

I thank the Members opposite for tabling the motion. The agrifood industry has changed over the decades as farming, fishing, food production and marketing has become a highly scientific operation. With a severe reduction in profit margins and increasing worldwide competition, it is essential that Northern Ireland is at the cutting edge of research and development. I cannot help but remember Mrs Dobson's comment about farmers having the reins. Farming has moved on a long way since farmers had reins and the little grey Ferguson. Today's farmers are highly skilled businessmen, engineers, accountants and scientists. In a similar way, our fishermen had to develop their skills set in order to survive.

Other Members talked about the impact that it has on the Northern Ireland economy. It has also made a major contribution to what happens here. In 2010, the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association published a report entitled, 'Value of Food and Drink Industry to Northern Ireland'. The report highlighted the significant contribution that the agrifood sector makes, employing directly up to 50,000 people and generating over £800 million in value-added to the economy. Almost as many jobs again are created in the upstream supply chain and ancillary industries, helping to sustain the rural community.

A recent survey was conducted around 234 school leavers and graduates in the sector. In that survey, employers were asked how well prepared they were for the world of work. Over 40% felt that they were poorly prepared. Employers also indicated that a proportion of employees need to improve their essential skills in numeracy, literacy and ICT. I acknowledge the Minister's presence here today. However, as Mrs Overend said earlier, a cross-sectoral approach is needed from the Department of Education with regard to developing numeracy, literacy and STEM subjects; the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment; DARD; and, of course, the Minister for Employment and Learning himself.

From an innovation perspective, combining education and training with practical knowledge, generated by experience in the production process, is an important driver for incremental innovation. In addition to the specialised and technical competences that are required for some jobs in the sector, the possession of more generic skills, such as problem-solving, analytical skills, creativity, team work and communication skills are considered important. Those skills shortages were identified most commonly in the position of managers, supervisors, specialists, professionals and technical employees.

A combination of innovative products, processes and practices is, clearly, the driving force behind the need for new skills in the sector. Deeper analysis of the study shows that employers suggest that they did not recruit from schools or university because recruits would be unlikely to have enough relevant work experience. What is the solution? Companies expressed a need for engagement and greater linkage between the further education colleges, CAFRE, universities and industry on the content, design and delivery of educational programmes, so that teaching and training adequately meets the needs of the sector. Integration of work experience in the course

curriculum was a priority alongside the need for more business-related teaching to be included in relevant courses.

Government and industry need to work together to develop the skills base in the industry. Important skills gaps need to be tackled, such as marketing and senior management skills, and on-farm, animal nutrition and generic traits, if the industry to increase its competitiveness. It also needs to raise the level of investment in research and development at every step of the supply chain.

With regard to the impact in rural areas, a successful and growing food and drinks industry will generate more employment and income for the rural economy, from where it sources and where many businesses are located. The industry is probably the single most important source of sustaining the rural population.

We can learn from other jurisdictions, such as the Scottish Executive and the Irish Government. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. Let us learn from our neighbours. We are not merely talking about growth; we are talking about smart growth. A Member mentioned Mash Direct, so I have to plug Rooney Fish in Killeel.

The impact of the agrifood sector on the Northern Ireland economy must not be underestimated. With over a quarter of Northern Ireland's manufacturing jobs and a contribution to the economy of over £500 million, the opportunities afforded to graduates

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

Mr Rogers: — in the sector must not be overlooked. There is potential to provide stability to the economy, create thousands of new jobs and increase the impact of our rural areas. However, this can be achieved only by improving productivity and enhancing the skills

Mr Speaker: The Member's time has gone.

Mr Rogers: — of our workforce. I support the motion.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion on behalf of my colleagues and me. I thank the proposer of the motion for

raising this important issue and all Members who contributed to the debate.

The agrifood industry is vital to our economy. It is one of the key sectors identified by the Executive in the Programme for Government and the economic strategy, and it was recognised by my Department as being in the priority skills sectors that contribute to rebuilding and rebalancing the local economy. The latest available information shows that gross turnover from the food and drink processing industry is around £3.7 billion. That figure has been growing over recent years. Taken together, the farming and processing industries contribute well over £900 million per annum to the economy in Northern Ireland and represent around 4% of the total gross value added. In 2011, the industries employed approximately 52,000 people, which represents about 6.5% of overall employment and about 10% of private sector employment. Therefore, the importance of the agrifood sector to the local economy in value added and jobs sustained is not in dispute.

Consequently, the Executive, my Department and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development have targeted the sector for growth. In support of that, in May 2012, the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment set up the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which is tasked with developing a strategic plan for the agrifood sector. The work of the board reaches across the subsectors of the supply chain. It has identified a number of themes, including skills and capability. Although provisional figures provided by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development show that the total income from farming decreased substantially in 2012, the food and drink processing sector has remained resilient, with turnover continuing to grow and the number of employees increasing.

Notwithstanding the setback for agriculture, my ministerial colleague the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michelle O'Neill, believes that, as the world population grows, we have many reasons to be positive. I agree with Minister O'Neill that there are opportunities ahead. We must position our Departments and the sector to take full advantage. My Department will work with DARD to improve the competitive nature of the local economy and build an industry that has the strength and resilience to withstand the types of setback recently witnessed by the local agriculture sector. That is why I have identified the food and drink manufacturing and processing

industry as a key sector for my Department to focus its employment and skills provision on.

Although the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development has overall policy responsibility for the development of the agrifood sector in Northern Ireland, my Department is committed to ensuring that the sector is provided with the appropriately skilled individuals whom it needs to flourish. My Department interacts with the industry in various ways. In higher education, it funds research and education related to the food industry. The further education sector delivers apprenticeship training and specific in-company training. The Department funds and performance manages the sector skills councils relating to the food industry. The Department also funds a wide range of apprenticeship training and employability initiatives. In 2009-2010, DEL contributed over £2 million to the food sector in that regard.

6.30 pm

Employers in the sector have identified a number of skills issues. As a result, my Department has established a future skills action group for food and drink manufacturing and processing. That group has been set up in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and Invest Northern Ireland, and it includes representatives from the industry, employers, and further and higher education. The group's aim is to bring stakeholders together to identify the skills issues that are facing the industry and to look at ways of addressing them. Those issues include difficulties recruiting sufficient numbers of graduates, a lack of food technologists and engineers, and the need to increase management and leadership skills. A number of Members identified those issues during the debate.

I launched the resultant skills action plan in June 2012, and work is ongoing to take forward interventions to encourage employers to avail themselves of existing training; to develop a programme of engagement with undergraduates to educate them about careers in the sector; to increase the science content in degree programmes to ensure that the qualifications meet the needs of industry —

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for giving way. There is a gap in Northern Ireland in that we do not have a veterinary science degree course. Does the Minister recognise that there may be an opportunity to have a combined effort between CAFRE, which has agricultural lands

and research facilities for agriculture, and Queen's University, which has built up some expertise in science over the years?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Byrne for raising that point. Minister O'Neill and I are keeping that under close observation and review. At present, a considerable number of trained vets are available, so there is no immediate shortage. However, there may be shortages in particular subsectors of veterinary medicine, as, of course, veterinary practitioners cover a wide range of different activities. We are certainly willing to have discussions and to consider alternative models by which we can address some of those different skills shortages. We are also keen to ensure that there is close co-operation between all the providers, whether they are in higher education or the further education sector.

I can certainly give the commitment that we will continue to explore the issue. However, in doing so, I would give a certain word of caution that, at best, mixed signals are coming across about the actual level of demand and how the existing provision of qualified people fits in with that.

One of the other themes of the future skills action plan is the need to develop an engineering apprenticeship that will meet the requirements of the food and drink processing sector.

A number of elements in the plan are now well progressed. For example, representatives from the sector attractiveness programme Tasty Careers have booked visits with 50 post-primary schools to educate young people and teachers about the wide range of quality careers that are available throughout the industry. Discussions are also under way to develop a similar programme for universities so that they can target appropriate undergraduates who may never have considered working in the food and drink processing industry.

I think that it is important that we stress that a huge range of different activities are involved in the food and drink manufacturing sector. Indeed, although certain aspects may have an image problem that may inhibit people from considering that sector for a career, it is important that people are aware of the breadth of activities they can become involved in. It is also important that people are aware of the wider message, which a number of Members sought to get across, that the industry is growing and has a significant gross value added. As such, people can have a stable

carer and one that provides a considerable degree of success and reward.

Through the higher education strategy, *Graduating to Success*, I have stressed my commitment to ensure that Northern Ireland's higher education institutions support the local economy, and I have reaffirmed my Department's commitment to help those institutions to become more responsive to industry's skills needs. *Graduating to Success* also highlights the need to enhance graduates' employability prospects. That will be taken forward through the implementation plan.

To provide the agrifood sector with appropriately skilled graduates, Queen's University and the University of Ulster offer a broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the areas of food science and the wider agrifood sector. The Department of Agriculture's College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise also provides higher education courses, validated by Queen's University and the University of Ulster, in a range of subjects that includes agriculture, food and horticulture. Demand for those courses is increasing. For example, I am advised by the Department of Agriculture that 743 students were enrolled on its full-time and part-time higher education courses in the current academic year. Total enrolments have increased by 25% over the past five years, with full-time enrolments up by almost 50% in the same period.

When new courses are being developed, representatives from the industry and sector skills councils are closely consulted on course content, structure and pathways within qualifications to ensure that graduates are equipped to meet current industry requirements. In addition, the Department of Agriculture is investing significantly in the provision of new facilities to support the continued delivery of higher education programmes at the college. A new dairy unit is about to be commissioned at the Greenmount campus and a new food innovation centre is being planned for the Loughry campus. Those facilities are also used for technology projects that underpin technology transfer to industry. My previous announcement to fund an additional 1,200 places for STEM-related programmes will have implications for the sector, and it further underlines my commitment. It is worth stressing that we regard agriculture- and agrifood-related skills as fitting under STEM and that universities have the flexibility to increase provision in those areas. The universities are mindful of their role in supporting the economy, particularly locally,

by ensuring that there is a pool of graduates skilled in relevant areas. Therefore, the universities should provide and resource courses in response to changes in demand for graduates.

In addition to the agrifood undergraduate provision in the universities and the agricultural colleges, the universities undertake research. Such research capability is vital for economic growth, competitiveness and the well-being of the community. As the major suppliers of research in Northern Ireland, the universities have a vital role to play. Our universities are recognised nationally and internationally for world-class research and development. They performed extremely well in the most recent research assessment exercise, in 2008. That is a UK-wide exercise to assess research quality. The research showed that half the assessed research in Northern Ireland is rated either internationally excellent or world-leading, and more than 98% of Northern Irish researchers are working in disciplines in which world-leading research is taking place. My Department has responsibility for funding higher education research and will allocate almost £50 million in recurrent funding in the present academic year.

This year, the Department introduced a new funding model that supports internationally excellent and world-leading research, as well as targeting a proportion of research funding at STEM areas and those of wider economic relevance. Agrifood has been identified as a target market for growth in Northern Ireland. The model aspires to achieve the dual aims of pursuing international excellence in R&D while ensuring that the current and future needs of the local economy are met. In collaborating with local businesses, the Connected programme has enabled the universities and further education colleges to provide a highly effective one-stop shop for businesses wishing to access the expertise and knowledge in the local research base. Through the current programme, Connected 2, the higher and further education sectors have proactively developed additional strategic links with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and CAFRE. It is anticipated that those additional linkages will enable Connected to better meet the knowledge transfer needs of the agrifood and biotechnology industry.

I welcome the healthy demand for those agrifood courses and research studentships, and recognise the important role that our universities and colleges play in supplying the sector with appropriately skilled individuals. Both Queen's University and the University of Ulster remain committed to deepening their

contribution to the economic, social and cultural development of this region and its global standing. The universities play a significant role in supporting the growing agrifood sector, contributing to agricultural and rural policy developments and advice, undertaking applied research and assisting product development. Both universities are keen to work in partnership with my Department's future skills action group and to enhance engagements with the agrifood sector to develop provision and to promote agrifood careers.

Mr Frew: I commend the motion to the House, as my colleagues have already spoken on it. I welcome the consensus throughout the Chamber from all parties supporting the motion. We recognise the importance of the agrifood sector to the economy and the wealth that it brings to this country. It should be supported by all in the Chamber because it is very important to the fabric not only of our economy but of society as a whole. The agrifood sector is not just about farming. I think that we all realise that, but it is important to state it. It is a science. It is manufacturing. It is engineering. It is accounting. It is everything nowadays, because even if you are on the farm, you need all those skills, and much more.

Of course, it is not just about the farm; it is about the process the whole way through. It is important that, while we grow and we support growth, we must support educated growth, because that way we will be able to get much more out of our industry and much more wealth into our nation. Farming has never let us down in the past, so why should it let us down now? Why should we, as a government, let it down? There is absolutely no reason why. That is why we need to support it and ensure that what we are doing now is right for that growth, right for the agrifood sector and right for the farming industry, and that we are supporting it as best we can, because there are threats to it.

There are threats to the very industry that we always talk about as rising, as growing and as being the future. Not least of those threats is the weather, which I do not think any Minister in the House can do anything about. There is also CAP reform. It has not been mentioned here once — we have been very positive — but CAP reform is a big threat. It could hurt the giants in our agrifood industry: beef and sheep meat; milk and milk products; and the poultry meat — all the giants that play such an important part in our agrifood sector. It could hurt those subsectors terribly, so we have to be very mindful that we support the industry, recognise the threats and understand the needs of the industry.

Farming and the agrifood sector have an important social element; it is not just about commercial interests or capitalism. That is why we have the CAP and single farm payments — to input to the industry and to help with food production and food security, which is a major issue throughout Europe. Europe is always mindful of the issue of food. Food can affect everything, from inflation to interest rates; it can affect the stability of a nation state, even in Europe. It is very important that we recognise that and help it to grow, because it will bring wealth to our nation and our people.

Another threat is, undoubtedly, the horse meat scandal and everything that that brings, including the uncertainty at the present time. I will reassure you again, because I have been echoing it through our airwaves and our TV screens for weeks: I have 100% assurance of the quality of meat that we produce in Northern Ireland, which is 100% traceable and which comes from the farm. It comes from the gate to the plate. There is absolutely no issue with that.

6.45 pm

As has been mentioned, there is always a silver lining to every dark cloud. You have only to go to a butcher's shop these days to see the queues that are forming outside. Those people know about assurance and they trust the local industry and what it produces.

This is not only an opportunity for us to help our local butchers, but to export even further and tell the world that what we produce is good, lean, green meat. That signal should go out to the world; it is something that the Executive should be encouraged to do, and we will do it today.

Sandra Overend spoke about joined-up government and about all the Ministers working together. She mentioned the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and said that we did not want to burden her. We are looking forward to the aftermath of the next election, when we will have all three Departments to do the work. We need to join up government better and we need to have focus.

The agrifood strategy board, which the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment introduced along with DARD, is due to publish a report very soon. We look forward to that because it is about the stakeholders, who are the key drivers in the industry, being given the chance to inform government about the way forward. It is very important that we never lose sight of that and that we ask the experts what support they

need and how we go about growing. It is important that we always keep an eye on the stakeholders and the experts in the industry.

There are still problems with Europe. The laying hens directive put a massive burden on our industry, as did the pigs directive. Yet, member states all over Europe do not enforce those rules while we do. That leaves our industry in a very difficult position, because it has done a lot of good but is penalised and left at a disadvantage when it comes to exporting its produce. That should not be allowed to happen.

There is a need to educate people in our sector, but there is also a very important indirect influence, which comes from scientists and experts who deal with and identify new threats and who help to eradicate diseases. Those people are very important and the industry cannot do without them.

I now turn to some other comments that were made by Members. Tom Buchanan talked about the importance of the agrifood sector, as we all did. He also mentioned the horse meat scandal, as we all have. We also talked about importing meat. Why are we still importing so much meat into this country when we export so much? We should look to exploit that at this time.

Chris Hazzard talked about the new innovation centre and highlighted the agriculture campuses, going into detail on the work at CAFRE and its work at Loughry and Enniskillen. He talked about the dangers of skills gaps, which is very important. We cannot leave anyone behind.

Jo-Anne Dobson talked about the popularity of farming and the agrifood sector at this time. She mentioned falling farm incomes, which is another threat to the industry. Farming succession is another serious threat. Graduates are coming out of universities and colleges but it takes them too long — nearly a lifetime — to take over the family business. We need to look at that, and I know that the Ulster Farmers' Union and others are looking at the issue of farming succession.

Joe Byrne welcomed the fact that the DUP brought the motion to the House. We appreciate his kind words. He talked about the work of the agriculture colleges and about adding value to sustain the sector. He also mentioned government financial input, which is very important. It is important that the Minister not only supports the colleges and the

universities with funding for places, but with money for research and innovation.

Sandra Overend mentioned her desperate desire to help the pig industry. I understand that, because Sandra knows that industry all too well. It needs support, along with our other major giants.

One of the major giants, which no one ever seems to mention, is the bakeries. Bakeries are up there when it comes to employment in the agrifood sector. We always seem to forget that. We talk about the production of food and meat, but we forget about the bakeries and how much employment they bring, which is very important.

I take what the Minister said about the commitment to funding, research places and a future skills action plan.

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

Mr Frew: We welcome his words about the STEM subjects and the importance of STEM to this sector.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the importance of the agrifood sector to the Northern Ireland economy; believes that this sector has the potential for significant growth in the future; recognises the need for graduates in this area and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to promote graduate programmes in this sector, particularly within our two universities.

Adjourned at 6.50 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Regional Development

Settlement in the case of Declan Gormley v the Department for Regional Development and Others

Published at 1.30 pm on Thursday 21 February 2013

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): I wish to make a Statement to the Assembly in respect of my decision to reach a settlement with Mr Declan Gormley who had taken action against the Department for Regional Development and 4 individuals, including my predecessor Conor Murphy, MP.

Mr Gormley had taken his case as a result of the decision to dismiss him from the position of non-executive director with NI Water in March 2010 following the publication of a report by an Independent Review Team. At that time Conor Murphy, MP was Minister for Regional Development.

Following the recent High Court Case in which Mr Gormley was awarded damages against Sinn Fein, he had indicated that all that he wanted from the litigation against the Department and the other defendants was an apology and the legal costs incurred in the case. In light of this statement I felt duty bound to ensure that this was explored with Mr Gormley's legal advisers.

Following tough negotiations by both parties it was eventually possible to reach a settlement on the basis of an apology on behalf of the Department and the payment of Mr Gormley's reasonable legal costs but without payment of damages.

The terms of the settlement are as follows:

The Plaintiff will stay the proceedings on terms that he will obtain no relief from any of the defendants apart from the Department, but the Department will give an apology in the following terms:

"APOLOGY: MR.DECLAN GORMLEY

In March 2010 some of the non-executive directors of Northern Ireland Water Limited, including Mr. Declan Gormley were dismissed from the board of that company by the then Minister for Regional Development, Mr Conor Murphy. The Department was the sole shareholder in the company.

Whilst this is regretted, it would now be impracticable for the situation to be reversed.

Notwithstanding this the Department categorically acknowledges that Mr Gormley was not guilty of any personal wrongdoing or misconduct in his role as non-executive director of Northern Ireland Water. The Department further acknowledges that his removal from office did not reflect adversely in any respect on his character or integrity.

The Department has now apologised to Mr Gormley and has agreed to pay his costs. Mr Gormley has accepted the apology, which is all that he wished to secure from this litigation. Accordingly the matter is now closed."

The plaintiff will not receive any damages but the Department will pay the plaintiff's reasonable costs to date.

As always I had to weigh a number of factors in coming to my decision. I believe that I have acted entirely in the public interest in deciding that this case should be settled.

Finance and Personnel

De-agentisation of Land and Property Services

Published at 12:00 noon on Friday 22 February 2013

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): In recent months my department has considered the future delivery of the functions provided by Land & Property Services (LPS). As a result, I have agreed that LPS will cease to be an Executive Agency within the Department from 1 April 2013.

LPS will retain its branding and continue to deliver the same services as before, but as a business area within the Department rather than as an Agency. This is largely an administrative change and will have no impact on the daily work of the majority of staff.



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