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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 4 March 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before we proceed to today's business, I have two announcements to make. The Speaker has been notified by the nominating officer of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr Mike Nesbitt, that Mr Robin Swann has been nominated as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning. The Speaker is satisfied that this correspondence meets the requirements of Standing Orders, and he has asked me to advise the House that Mr Robin Swann has been confirmed as Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning with effect from 27 February 2013.

In addition, I wish to inform Members that the Minister of Justice wrote to the Speaker on Thursday 28 February to advise that he would not be in a position to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Criminal Justice Bill tomorrow. The stage will be rescheduled by the Business Committee. Let us move on.

Matter of the Day

Security: Mortar Bomb Find in Londonderry

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr Gregory Campbell has been given leave to make a statement on the mortar bombs found in Londonderry that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. All other Members who wish to be called should indicate that by rising in their place and continuing to do so. Each Member will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I also remind Members that, as an investigation is ongoing, they should be careful about what they say so that nothing might impact on any case that may come before the courts.

Mr Campbell: Last evening, on the Foyle Road in Londonderry, police intercepted a vehicle and, as the local police commander indicated this morning on various news media, in that vehicle were four mortars, live and ready for operation. We live in the context of dissident republicans having made a number of attempts on the lives of innocent people. Thankfully, only a small number of those attempts — too many — have been successful. Many have been prevented by good police work and community support, and it appears to be the case that last night was a similar event. Last night, however, we were within five or 10 minutes of a major outrage. How major it could have been can be established by recalling that, in 1985, there was a similar mortar bomb attack on Newry police station, and the end result was that nine innocent officers were murdered. Police stations in the Londonderry area — any of the three or four that I can immediately think of — are all in built-up areas. The police have indicated, as we all know, that these mortars are notoriously unreliable, so not only innocent police officers but innocent civilians were being targeted.

We need to send out a message that the Assembly in its totality utterly condemns the actions of those responsible last night, commends and thanks the Police Service and

the officers responsible for apprehending the device and calls on the community, on whose information, we hope, last night occurred, to keep giving more information such as this and for the police to keep taking the action that they are taking to prevent the wholesale slaughter that could have occurred last night and, thankfully, by the grace of God, did not.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. On behalf of Sinn Féin, I join with the comments on the Floor and echo the frustration and anger that was felt by the residents of the Brandywell and Foyle Road areas last night. The vast majority of people in our city woke up this morning thankful that this incident, through whatever intelligence sources, had been stopped. People who are intent on damaging our city and our people need today to step up to the plate, come to the microphones and explain to the people of our city how those actions will advance any city, any people or any cause or build any city of equals or any Ireland of equals.

I was on the ground last night until late this morning. There was palpable anger and frustration from the residents. That was in stark contrast to the view of the vast majority of people and the mood in the city over the course of the events at the weekend in Ebrington Square. It was clearly viewed as an attack on our city and our people. The human cost of moving some of our most elderly and vulnerable residents from their homes in the late hours of this morning was stark. It is, it needs to be said, in stark contrast to the unity of purpose that does exist, continues to exist today and will continue to exist across all sectors of our city. Those who are intent on taking that away or somehow damaging the spirit or the unity across our city need today to answer to the people of the city what those actions were going to achieve in advancing any people or any community.

Mr Durkan: I join other Members in their calls. Ms McLaughlin spoke of the upheaval for residents. I know that my party colleague Pat Ramsey shares those frustrations. He was on the ground with her last night.

There is huge relief in the city of Derry today that those instruments of death and destruction were intercepted last night. Full credit and praise must go to the police for their brave and ultimately heroic actions. We shudder to think what might have happened otherwise, but I have little doubt that we would have woken up today to news and scenes of carnage. I speak for Derry today when I condemn those who would visit that on our society and when I re-

emphasise our determination to drive Derry and Northern Ireland forward and not to allow others to drag it back.

Mr Elliott: I start by thanking the PSNI and the security services for their apprehension of the mortars, which has hopefully stopped the devastation that they had the potential to create in the city of Londonderry. The Ulster Unionist Party recognises and indeed can empathise with the people of the city of Londonderry who were disturbed and suffered as a result of the actions of last night.

I do not know whether these mortars came from the same stock, but, last week, the security services indicated that a mortar found in Belfast had come from old Provisional IRA stock. I challenge people from the Provisional IRA, some of whom may now be in Sinn Féin, to bring forward the information that is required to help the security services to stop such actions as happened last night. They must ensure that they give every bit of information possible. Let us be clear: some of those people know exactly where these munitions and explosives are. They should come forward and say. That is the outworking of the so-called decommissioning process. Where are all the weapons that were decommissioned? I thought that they were all out of circulation, but, obviously, they are not. Shame on those who are carrying out these acts now, and shame on those who carried them out in the past.

Mr Ford: I join the Members who have already spoken in condemning those who would carry out such a deed and in praising the police officers who dealt so resolutely with the threat and the army technical officers who assisted them.

I got a briefing soon after the incident occurred yesterday evening. It was absolutely clear that it was a major threat to life, as has been said, not just to the lives of the police officers for whom it was almost certainly intended but to the lives of civilians in heavily populated areas of Derry city. It is absolutely clear how utterly reckless those who would carry out such deeds are. There is no question of any justification. There is no question of their having any support. It is time that they listened to voices of the people from in and around the Brandywell area whom we heard across the media this morning condemning so eloquently what went on. They made it absolutely clear that those who would carry out such deeds do not speak for them.

Since I became Minister, I have had the chance to visit the city on a number of occasions for

positive activities in Ebrington aligned to the City of Culture and other aspects, to speak to police officers at Strand Road or to see some of the other good work, led by the city council, being done on community safety issues. Clearly, there is a positive mood in Derry this year, shown in the way that the people of the city have responded to those who would carry out this kind of threat.

It used to be said that there was, in a sense, a division between those who talked about Londonderry and those who talked about Derry. It seems to me that that is not the case these days. The division is between a tiny minority seeking to drag this society back and the overwhelming majority of people who want us to move forward, recognising all the political difficulties that we have in this place but determined to turn our back on this kind of violence. The positive connections between the Police Service and the citizens on both sides of the river are a key way of demonstrating that. We saw that just a couple of weeks ago when Philippa Reynolds tragically died in a car accident. There was enormous support from right across the city for her PSNI colleagues and what they did. I have no doubt that that enormous support continues.

It is a tragedy that a small number of young people got sucked into behaviour against police officers last night, but it is clear where the city as a whole stands. I trust that the Assembly will be seen to stand resolute and united, as we have done, in support of the peace process and those who uphold that peace.

Mr Eastwood: I echo the words and sentiments of the Members who have spoken already. We are very lucky that we are not talking today about something even more serious. I want to put on record our praise for the PSNI and an Garda Síochána for the efforts that they put in to ensuring that another potential attack on our city and our people was foiled. I offer sympathy to the residents of the Brandywell area who were put out of their homes again last night. The people who purport to carry out these activities on behalf of the Irish people need to hear very clearly that the people of Derry and of Ireland as a whole reject them and view them as enemies of our peace process and our political future. We will not be held back. Positive stories are coming out of our city, and we will not allow those who live in fantasy land to drag us back to the past. Derry is on an upward curve, and we will not be deterred from that. This will be a very good year for our city, no matter what these people try to do. I know that I speak on behalf of all the people of the city when I say that.

12.15 pm

Mr I McCrea: As a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, I condemn those who set out with the sole intention of murdering police officers and other people who live in the area. I commend the police officers who, in their normal day-to-day work and line of duty, were able to catch people who were intent on murder. I say, "Well done" to those officers and "Keep up the good work".

This is a better day than it could have been. My colleague Gregory Campbell referred to the lives that could have been lost. That cannot and should not be lost on the community, especially those who subscribe to and support dissident republican activity. It is important that we, as a community, stand together, condemn those responsible and ensure that the courts and the justice system deal with the people who have been arrested. We leave that in their hands. Again, I commend the police officers, and I hope that more work is done and more information brought to the police to ensure that further arrests are made and further attempts on police lives are stopped.

Mr Allister: I trust that we all welcome the fact that this murderous attempt was thwarted and that we will all show our appreciation and thanks to the intelligence services, which contributed to that thwarting. Sadly, some in the House wish to thwart the work of the intelligence services and to see the efforts to have the National Crime Agency operating in this Province thwarted. Last night was a reminder of why we need such facilities.

Vile, hideous and murderous as last night's attempt was, it was no more vile, hideous or murderous than the Provo attack on Newry police station, which some in the House still will not condemn. Of course, such acts are still happening, because the Provo template is seen to have worked for those who operated it. The current bombers look into this House, with its special provisions that guarantee a place for terrorists in government, and draw hope and succour from the belief that the terrorism that worked for the Provos can also work for them. That is why the attacks continue, and, so long as the House closes its eyes to that reality and continues to sustain a system that rewarded terrorism, no one should be surprised that, sadly but inevitably, we have more terrorism from those who ape what the Provos did and who follow through to the letter the Provo template on all this. This was wrong. It was wrong in the 1970s. It was wrong in the 1980s. It was wrong in the 1990s. It has been wrong in this century. Those who justify what happened

in the past continue to feed the mantra that generates today's terrorism. If they want to be taken seriously today, they need forthrightly to condemn and repudiate that which they did in the past, setting the example to today's terrorists. That, sadly, is the reality.

Mr McNarry: Ten minutes from murder is a daunting prospect and another warning that our society remains under constant threat from evil people who clearly do not fit into and have no desire to fit into today's society, which we in this House have helped to create. That is their decision, but, as Gregory Campbell said, there is an onus of responsibility on the House to stand together today in total rejection of this near-miss action, and so we must. It must not just be a token call from the House but be driven home by all Members from every constituency in Northern Ireland. Last night was a timely reminder to all towns and villages throughout Northern Ireland that they must remain vigilant and alert, because their safety is not guaranteed. It can and will be guaranteed only by the tremendous work carried out by the PSNI and others last night in rescuing a situation that was 10 minutes from sheer hell.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Having today had a matter of the day and a question for urgent oral answer rejected on the subject of the perversity of the operation of bail arrangements in the Province, I want to ask why the House is running away from facing up to the consequences of the actions of the courts last Friday, when William Frazer, a man without a record, was refused bail —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: — while Sean Hughes —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: — a notorious IRA man, walked free on bail.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Allister: Why is the House running away from debating that matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member should take his seat. As all Members are aware, it is the Speaker who determines questions for urgent oral answer and matters of the day. If any Member wishes to have an item of business discussed in the Assembly, that should be taken to the Business Committee, which determines what items come forth. This is clearly not a point of order.

Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item in 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 Basil McCrea replace Mr Robin Swann as a member of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure; and that Mr Sean Rogers replace Mr John McCallister as a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. — [Mrs McKeivitt.]

Executive Committee Business

Public Bodies (The Office of Fair Trading Transfer of Consumer Advice Scheme Function and Modification of Enforcement Functions) Order 2013: Assembly Consent Motion

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I beg to move

That this Assembly consents to the Public Bodies (The Office of Fair Trading Transfer of Consumer Advice Scheme Function and Modification of Enforcement Functions) Order 2013 in the form of the draft laid before the UK Parliament on 12 December 2012.

It might be helpful for Members if I give some background to the tabling of the motion and how the order affects Northern Ireland. In 2011, the UK Government launched a consultation under the title "Empowering and Protecting Consumers", in which they proposed a number of reforms to the current institutional arrangements to ensure that consumer advice, representation and enforcement were delivered effectively and efficiently. This order will implement some of the changes proposed in that consultation. The order is being made under section 5 of the Public Bodies Act 2011, which enables UK Ministers by order to modify the functions of a specified public body and to make consequential and supplementary changes. The primary purpose of the order is to make changes to the Office of Fair Trading's consumer advice function. Currently, the Office of Fair Trading has a power, under section 8 of the Enterprise Act 2002, to operate a consumer advice scheme for the whole of the United Kingdom. The changes that the order will introduce in relation to Great Britain are to transfer this function to Citizens Advice and to Citizens Advice Scotland. In relation to Northern Ireland, the OFT consumer advice function other than for postal services will be abolished. The order will also make minor modifications to a number of enforcement functions of the OFT.

As the power to provide consumer advice is a transferred matter, the consent of the Assembly is required for the order by virtue of section 9(3) of the Public Bodies Act 2011. Although the OFT has had the power to provide for a general consumer advice scheme in Northern Ireland, it has never operated such a scheme here. This is because my Department already had a

consumer advice service in operation before the launch of the scheme provided for by the OFT. The service operated by my Department operates under the name of Consumerline and gives advice to consumers on the circumstance of their specific complaint. Consequently, the changes being brought in by this order will have no significant impact for Northern Ireland consumers. As I have already indicated, under the order, the OFT will retain the function for providing for consumer advice in relation to postal services for Northern Ireland. This is because postal services are not a devolved matter. Although the OFT retains the function of providing for the advice scheme for postal services in relation to Northern Ireland, the advice service will actually be delivered by the Citizens Advice service.

The order also makes some minor changes to the enforcement of consumer law. The OFT is designated as an enforcer in a range of consumer legislation in force across the UK. In some cases, it shares a duty to enforce with other enforcers. The policy intention is that, in the future, local trading standards authorities, including the Trading Standards Service of my Department in Northern Ireland, will take the lead in enforcing consumer protection legislation. This necessitates a change to the legislation specified in the order so that the OFT will no longer have a duty to enforce but, rather, a power. The order also makes an amendment to section 213 of the Enterprise Act 2002 to provide that the enforcers, including my Department, will no longer need to consult the OFT when applying for an enforcement order. Instead, enforcers will simply be required to notify the OFT.

The amendments to be made by the order will ensure that Northern Ireland will continue to benefit from a UK consumer advice scheme for the users of postal services, and they will enable the Trading Standards Service of my Department to take the lead in enforcing a range of consumer protection legislation. At the same time, the OFT expertise in this area will continue to be available in Northern Ireland and in common with the rest of the United Kingdom. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Flanagan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for tabling this Assembly consent motion. I will not keep you too long. The Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment considered the Assembly consent motion at its meeting on 24 January and was content with the proposals.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment for considering the matter in the manner in which it did and for allowing the motion to come to the Floor of the House today. Again, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly consents to the Public Bodies (The Office of Fair Trading Transfer of Consumer Advice Scheme Function and Modification of Enforcement Functions) Order 2013 in the form of the draft laid before the UK Parliament on 12 December 2012.

12.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Benefits: Advice and Awareness

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. *[Interruption.]* Order. *[Interruption.]* Clear the Public Gallery.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the challenges facing the advice sector and the need for individuals to have access to advice and assistance in relation to their welfare rights; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to devise an advice services strategy, to develop an awareness campaign for individuals and to provide adequate funding for independent advice providers.

I do not think that any Member of the Assembly would not recognise the hugely important role played by the advice sector in society today. Front line advice workers deal on a daily basis with individuals and families, often in distress, always in need of help and guidance. We are talking about older people, younger people and people with disabilities. They need help with a wide range of issues: employment rights; benefit advice; housing-related enquiries; immigration help; increasingly, sadly, emigration help; fuel poverty; health issues; and many, many more. Without accessible front line advice services, many people would not get the support that they need and end up drowning in a sea of debt, poverty and despair. We should not underestimate the lifeline that is provided by advice services, nor can we take it for granted.

I am sure I am not the only Member who has had to contact regional advice providers, such as the Citizens Advice or Advice NI, for help dealing with particularly complex enquiries from constituents. Nor am I alone, I am sure, in working closely with local community-based advice providers and resource centres on a regular basis on individual cases. Those services are important to us as public representatives and are vital to the public that we represent.

Although access to statutory advice services and departmental direct lines is effective in resolving many individual concerns, there is no doubt that the invaluable services provided by the independent advice sector complement statutory services and increase accessibility. The sector is being forced to deal with an unprecedented demand for help. It is being forced to do so within serious budgetary constraints, putting massive pressure on those men and women who work round the clock, often in difficult conditions, with stressed-out clients.

Unemployment is rife and businesses are struggling, as we show few signs of recovery from recession. For every big firm or multinational that has to close, like FG Wilson and HMV, there are dozens and dozens of small businesses giving up the ghost in towns and cities across the North. Currently, around 53% of people over the age of 16 here are claiming benefits. That is a huge proportion. The redundancies to which I have just referred will lead many newcomers to what is the minefield of the benefits system, after having being employed for years. Those people in particular would be lost without the assistance of welfare rights workers.

The workload for advice groups has been compounded by the huge number of appeals against decisions deriving from the flawed Atos work capability assessment. With the failings of Atos, we have seen an unprecedented number of overturns on appeal. In many cases, if not most, those people, often vulnerable, have decisions overturned in their favour thanks to guidance and representation from advice workers to ensure that they receive their entitlement.

It would be impossible to touch on every aspect of support that is provided by the advice sector, but we cannot ignore the changes that the Department for Social Development (DSD) has made, and is seeking to make, to the welfare system, or how those changes will impact upon individuals and the sector. We have seen the new employment support system implemented and changes to the local housing allowance. Although those changes came with advice provided by the Department, it must be acknowledged that new applications and criteria brought forward by those actions proved complicated and confusing for individuals.

Without the support of the independent advice sector, many existing and new claimants would have ended up lost to the system or witnessing a delay in their payments. The SDLP believes that we must work towards reducing the strain

facing the sector, preferably through reducing the number of those who require help but immediately through resourcing the sector adequately to deal with the pressures that it is under. It is our contention that the economic context — budgetary cuts across the board and the pending welfare reform changes — will only add to the pressure. It is vital that we support the advice sector now and through the pending period of transition to ensure that individuals, particularly those who are vulnerable, are able to access free and independent advice to safeguard them against destitution.

We recognise and appreciate the work that DSD has done to date, and continues to do, to assist individuals with their welfare rights. Annually, DSD provides some £4-5 million for a range of advice provision, including regional advice support — there have been some issues there — front line advice support, housing advice and advice supporting benefit uptake. The Department has had success with its benefit uptake programme, as I am sure that the Minister will remind us, and a recent DSD consultation aims to build on that success to target vulnerable groups more successfully.

However, despite that commitment from the Department, there is much more to be done. Our concerns centre on the current demand facing the sector and the inevitability that that demand will grow with the proposed changes to the welfare system. We cannot ignore those changes, and it is unfair to expect claimants and potential claimants to wait in limbo, relying on news reports and Chinese whispers to inform them of the implications of reform. Advice services receive queries daily about the coming reforms, and as yet there are no concrete answers for them to give. Centres need to be resourced to deal with an increased volume of calls and to offer support and guidance to individuals throughout this period of change.

Although I welcome DSD's work, it is important to make the point that the Department itself has acknowledged that, for many, the barrier to benefits is a mistrust of statutory bodies. With the constant media focus on the Tory cuts agenda, individuals are now, more than ever, anxious in that regard. They would much rather get help from a poacher than be struck off by the gamekeeper. It is also worth noting that the new systems are expected to rely more heavily on IT applications and a new IT processing system. DSD must engage with community-based advice providers as well as regional organisations to instruct and assist them through theoretical and functional changes. I fear that an increased role for online benefit

applications may present a further barrier to benefit uptake here.

In England, the Cabinet Office, along with the Big Lottery Fund, has created a £65 million advice service transition fund to assist the advice sector to provide support to individuals through these welfare changes. Alongside that fund, the Government have published a review of the not-for-profit social welfare advice sector in England. That demonstrates that not only do the Government have a role to play in supporting the sector but that advice providers will need to show initiative and change the way in which they work. They must increase levels of collaboration to build sustainability and effectiveness.

None of that £65 million fund has been allocated to Northern Ireland, and I want to know where the parity is in that. Scotland has also injected new money — in the region of £6 million — to advice agencies to assist with welfare changes. I appeal to the Minister for Social Development to do likewise, particularly as it has already been accepted that the impact of these changes will be even worse here than in other regions on these islands. The Minister needs to identify adequate financial support, and that support must be available to him to strengthen our advice services. The Minister must also show leadership and encourage the advice sector to form a more effective working relationship with the Department to ensure that the best front line services are available to individuals in need of help.

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I want to place on record that the Committee has not formally considered the motion, but I will seek to accurately relay the thoughts of the Committee and the way in which it has dealt with these issues.

The Committee recently concluded its consideration of the Welfare Reform Bill, and one key element of that was people's right to access independent advice. The Committee received presentations on putting such independent advice on a statutory basis, but stopped short of supporting the formal proposition to seek to amend the Bill in that way. I speak for every member of the Committee, all of whom were consistent in the view that people need to have proper access to independent advice on their entitlement to benefit, and so on.

The Committee is unanimous in wanting to ensure that the Department gives adequate

resources to the independent advice sector. The Committee members were unanimous in recognising that, on every occasion when awareness campaigns were organised or launched, there was a take-up of benefit entitlement that people had not properly availed themselves of until that point. Therefore, the Committee agreed unanimously on all the key aspects of today's motion. That will be very welcome to all those who rely on benefits because it is important that they get their entitlements.

The precise methodology of how the Minister, the Department and the advice sector work together to make sure that we maximise the rights of claimants to be able to get their entitlements is a matter for discussion. Clearly, as the proposer of the motion pointed out, the Department already deploys considerable resources to the advice sector, and we need to ensure that those are deployed wisely. People will, undoubtedly, face increased challenges as a result of the welfare reform agenda. It may, therefore, be logical for the Department to put aside increased resources for the independent advice sector. The Committee unanimously endorsed all the concepts of the motion, and that is a very good and welcome development.

To date, the Committee has looked at a range of issues, had a range of engagements and, for example, embraced the work on fuel poverty. Stakeholders highlighted the need to ensure people's ongoing awareness of their entitlements. Many people, including some senior citizens, do not always know their entitlements. People in the childcare sector pointed out that resources are available to many parents who are, as yet, unaware of them. When the Department and the Social Security Agency embarked on awareness campaigns of benefit entitlement, there was not a single occasion when people were not able to draw down extra entitlements as a result.

So it is fair to say that, although the Committee for Social Development has not considered the motion formally, the record will show that members across all its parties will endorse it unanimously.

12.45 pm

Ms P Bradley: I also rise to speak as a member of the Social Development Committee. I welcome the tabling of the motion today. As a caring society, we in Northern Ireland must ensure that those who require access to advice services can do so in a timely manner.

Day and daily, constituents come into my office expressing a high level of fear and trepidation about the incoming welfare reforms. There is also misunderstanding and misinterpretation about the forthcoming legislation and about the impact that it will have on people who currently receive welfare and on people in work who worry about what will happen should they ever need to access the system. I believe that good-quality advice is vital in counteracting that misinformation and possible scaremongering in our communities.

We have seen success in the past year of campaigns that were aimed at raising people's awareness of the importance of ensuring that they receive all the financial help that they are entitled to. That has been especially true in the case of people who are aged over 60. Since 2011, we have seen significant numbers of people taking advantage of the various ways of conducting a benefit check on their household to ensure that they are not missing out.

The question of who is best placed to deliver that advice also needs careful consideration. I worked for Citizens Advice for a number of years, so I believe that, as they are embedded in our communities, the independent providers are a good way of delivering that advice.

The role of statutory agencies also needs to be considered and explored so that the good work that has been happening can be built on. For instance, the role of statutory agencies, such as Land and Property Services (LPS), could directly target people who may not be availing themselves of their full entitlement. People who are identified will receive a personal letter from the Minister encouraging them to make the call. That shows how the statutory agencies working together can have a positive impact. I believe that the statutory and voluntary agencies need to work hand in hand to ensure that we are reaching everyone who needs to be reached in that respect.

Welfare reform is not about punishing the poor or creating division between deserving and undeserving; rather, it is about ensuring that we make better use of our resources to target those who need help the most. It is about making work pay and ending our over-reliance on our benefit system by those who are capable of work.

Advice before the implementation reform and after its introduction is vital to ensure that we achieve our aims. The majority will not scrutinise the reforms as we have done in the Chamber and in Committee. Therefore, we need to ensure that the information that is in the

public domain is correct, easy to understand and relevant to each individual circumstance, and that people are aware where they can get that advice.

The Department has already begun that work through media campaigns and work in the voluntary and community sector. Statutory agencies have also played a role, and I believe that they will be vital in reaching the hardest groups in our society to give help and support. I support the motion.

Mr Copeland: I thank Mr Durkan for bringing forward this important issue. The role of the advice sector is discussed occasionally in this Chamber, and it appears that the same issues, such as a lack of resources or even uncertainty about meeting statutory obligations that need to be met, are raised time after time.

In his concluding remarks, the Minister will hopefully be able to clarify his vision for the future of the sector, particularly given the possible turbulent nature of the next few years.

Looking at Advice NI's annual statistics for 2012, it is easy to see why organisations such as that provide such a crucial role. It dealt with just over a quarter of a million enquiries last year. Add to that the endless streams of people who go to other organisations or those who should, but do not, seek support, and, very shortly, a picture emerges through the mist. The forthcoming Welfare Reform Bill will only put further strain on that already busy sector. It is a piece of legislation that we were told was so important and so urgent when it was eventually introduced in the Assembly in October that we could not afford to delay, even for a number of weeks, without facing huge financial penalties. Yet, it continues to linger, casting a huge cloud of uncertainty. The Minister has stated that decisions have needed to be taken by so many dates now that, unfortunately, no one really has an idea of where exactly we lie with the timetable. That impacts greatly on those involved in making the preparations for the advice sector.

With the Department having seemingly failed to explain to the wider public what may be coming down the line, that has left the wider sector in the inevitable position of having to prepare for what will be a sudden and substantial upsurge in enquiries. There is no denying that the Department, with the support of the wider advice sector, has begun to work on issues such as benefit uptake. However, it is falling far short of the mark on other issues, such as our continuing and unacceptably high levels of fuel poverty.

On top of the existing challenges, Minister McCausland is presiding over the progress of the Welfare Reform Bill, which includes clauses that his own party colleagues said last week in Westminster, I believe, will hurt those living in poverty and those with disabilities. Although the Minister will no doubt refer with some clarity to the millions of pounds — £3.5 million according to me — that were made available to fund front line advice, less than half of that came from his Department, with the balance being met by councils. He may well then, with equal fervour, state that money is being made available until March 2015 for the Northern Ireland Advice Services Alliance.

All of that is very welcome and noble, but we have all heard it so many times before. However, when one looks back just a few months and sees the levels to which key areas such as the social development housing programme underspent the money that his Department provides for advice provision, that could be viewed as less than significant.

I would like the Minister to detail, even roughly, how the level of money that his Department has spent on public messages warning of the potential introduction of the Welfare Reform Bill, as well as increasing the support available for the advice sector, compares with other departmental campaigns, such as the hugely worthwhile road safety campaign of the Department of the Environment (DOE) or even some public campaigns run by the health service.

Despite a propaganda campaign that the Department apparently tried to start last week, we can not for one moment forget that the Bill will make an already hard life more difficult for potentially tens of thousands of families. Any and all forms of support but especially the provision of quick advice and assistance will be crucial if the Department is to ensure that those families find some way of coping.

It is not an ideal situation. The Department could be accused of underperforming in some aspects, but I am glad that there is at least someone in the independent advice sector —

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

Mr Copeland: — that is ready to step in and is more than capable of doing so. I support the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the motion and thank the Members for securing the debate.

Welfare reform, on top of the ongoing recession and cuts to public services, means that enormous pressure will be placed on our already strained advice sector services in Northern Ireland.

I know from those coming into my constituency office that people have an increasing number of questions about the changes to the welfare system. Information on the changes has been drip-fed, so it is difficult for the public to understand what those will mean for them in real terms. People are worried about the changes and afraid of the unknown. Therefore, an awareness campaign to update individuals on what is happening, and when, is vital to allay fears and provide clarification on some untrue rumours out there.

I have also seen increased demand in my office for representation at appeal hearings and tribunals. Given the high number of cases overturned on appeal, we need to ensure that the correct decisions are being made at the outset so as not to waste resources on appeals. With our office cost expenditure being continually reduced over the next number of years, we will inevitably rely further on local advice organisations such as Citizens Advice and the East Belfast Independent Advice Centre in my constituency. Without them, I can only begin to imagine what our caseload would increase to.

As other Members said, and as we heard in the Committee for Social Development, Advice NI has sent some of its advisers to applied suicide intervention skills training. Unfortunately, that is a harsh reality and enables members of staff to be able to recognise those at risk of suicide. I wrote to the Minister, a few weeks ago, to suggest that he look into commissioning additional advice workers, perhaps on a constituency basis. Those advice workers could work across each MLA's constituency office on a rota basis, over the five-year implementation, to provide impartial advice to constituents. Although it would not solve the problem entirely, it could go some way towards alleviating pressure on the advice sector.

In short, it is clear that finances need to be made available in order to provide mass training for those working in the advice sector, so that they will be equipped to deal with the substantial changes under universal credit. It is concerning that there appears to have been a lack of communication between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the advice sector in relation to the huge pressure that the Bill will place on them over the next five to 10 years. Importantly, the advice sector needs not

only adequate funding but to know that the funding is long term, so that it is allowed to plan and review the service that it is delivering, without having to worry constantly about where its next money is going to come from.

In closing, Mr Deputy Speaker, I join Members in supporting the motion and in calling for action on an advice services strategy in order to show the sector that we are serious in our support for the vital work that it does — work that often goes unrecognised.

Ms Brown: I rise as a member of the Social Development Committee to speak on the motion. I congratulate the Members in securing the debate, which I am happy to support. At this point, I declare an interest as a member of the management board of the citizens advice bureau in Antrim.

There is no doubt that we are in the midst of times of change for many people within the benefit system. It is, therefore, critical that we, as elected Members, ensure that all our constituents who are affected by the change are given every assistance possible to help manage that change. Central to supporting the uptake of unclaimed benefits is the provision of advice and information. The Department has a role to play in providing to current or potential claimants information on entitlement, and it provides £4.5 million a year to support voluntary service advice. A further £1.9 million is made available by local councils. I believe that the Department has worked very hard to provide information in that area. I have seen plenty of advertising and information being made available. It is a very positive initiative, which appears to be delivering as intended.

Advice and support is of particular importance at this time, as changes to the welfare system have caused anxiety among vulnerable groups. I know that from my experience in my constituency office, as people worry about their future entitlement and future possible hardships.

In Northern Ireland, we benefit from a wide range of voluntary organisations, which communicate and work with the vulnerable groups that are in receipt of benefits or with those who are seeking assistance from the welfare system. Citizens Advice provides information and guidance on a range of issues, not just benefit uptake. It is in receipt of funding support from government to support the tremendous work that it does in easing people's anxieties and worries amid an economic downturn.

There are, of course, further examples, such as Age NI, which, I know, has been encouraging benefit uptake among the elderly, and I am sure that there are organisations in each of our communities that are doing very similar, worthwhile work. Very recently, I have been working with Employers for Childcare, which has been providing benefit checks and childcare vouchers to my constituents in South Antrim. That work is ongoing.

I am keen to see that those at the centre of change to the welfare system are supported by the Department in a proactive fashion. I know that those currently in receipt of disability living allowance are receiving communication in relation to the introduction of the personal independent payment and that those who were previously on incapacity benefit have received communication in relation to the introduction of employment and support allowance. The Department is, therefore, supporting those directly affected, and the advice sector, in conjunction with the Department's Opening Doors strategy, is onside in supporting those in need of help. I am, therefore, generally supportive of the motion. I thank the Members for tabling it, as it highlights the need to support many thousands of people through a very difficult time of change. I support the motion.

1.00 pm

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I, too, rise to support the motion. As someone who worked as an advice worker in a welfare rights centre for 27 years before I came to the Assembly, I am acutely aware of the necessity for and importance of the advice sector.

The complexity of the current benefit system has meant that more and more people have required advice and assistance to deal with their benefits. Advice workers also have an advocacy role. As MLAs with constituency clinics, we all realise the increase, in particular, in the number of people who have been turned down because of the shambles — I say "shambles" advisedly — of the work capability assessment and what ensued from it and the absolute need for advice and advocacy to be given to the most vulnerable people in our society, who are suffering as a result.

A lot of the time and energy of advice workers and people who work in advice centres is spent seeking funding when it could be much better employed in actually dealing with the purpose for which they are there, which is to give people advice and assistance. Now we have welfare

reform coming down the road. Paula Bradley said in her speech that it is not an attack on the poor. Of course it is an attack on the poor. As recently as the weekend, the British Defence Secretary, when looking for more funding for defence, suggested that the welfare budget — no other budget — should be cut, as if there had not been enough cuts. It is said that welfare reform does not target the poor, but those who are most in need. It does target those who are most in need, but it does so by cutting their benefits and ensuring that there will be more poverty and destitution as time goes on.

As regards universal credit, for instance, we have been told that there are a couple of reasons for it. Its underlying principle is that it is better to be in work than on benefits. Nobody argues with that. We have also been told that the reason that welfare reform is being introduced is to simplify the benefit system. Well, I have sat for the past year, approximately, listening to officials trying — I say "trying" — to explain universal credit. If that is not complex, I wish someone would tell me what is. All it does is reinforce, more and more, the need for advice and advocacy services.

The point was made by, I think, both Paula and Pam that advice centres are very rooted in communities, but a lot of them are also cross-community centres and do tremendous cross-community work. In many cases, there is no barrier to people going to different advice centres to get much-needed advice and assistance. The Minister has talked about a strategy for increasing advice and, indeed, benefit take-up. For instance, underclaimed pension credit currently runs at approximately £1.9 million. That needs to be addressed. Over the years, various schemes have been tried through Advice NI and CAB. To a large extent, they have been successful, but they need to be more successful. They need to target more people and ensure that those who are most in need of benefits get them. Historically, people here have a fear of officialdom and the statutory organisations. Again, the point was made that people are much more likely to go to independent advice centres, where they feel that they get a hearing that is beneficial to them.

We have heard much talk about the online take-up of benefits. We have been told by officials that 75% of people here in the North have access to broadband. As one Committee member suggested, the survey was, presumably, done online. Therefore, it actually targeted the 75% of people who have

broadband. Many rural areas do not have access to broadband.

The Department is closing three community offices. One is in Crossmaglen, another is in Shantallow in Derry, and the name of the other one escapes me at the moment. Those offices service rural hinterlands and large urban populations, particularly in Derry. There is much need for them. With the closure of those offices, more and more advice and assistance will be needed by more and more people.

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

Mr Brady: Although I support the motion, I think that the Minister needs to come forward today and give us a sustainable strategy for advice and tell us what advice centres can expect in the future as their workload continues to increase.

Mr Eastwood: Obviously, I support the motion. It is meant not to be political or party political but helpful. I am glad that we have support from around the House. The motion is set in the context of the fact that over 120,000 children in Northern Ireland live in poverty, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found last year. Many of them live in very severe poverty, and there is no sense of that figure getting any better. We also have the oncoming onslaught of welfare reform, which has been mentioned. Anybody who works in the community knows the difficulties that that will create and that it is being driven by Tory ideology to try to attack the poor to prop up everything else. We should not ignore that fact when we are dealing with this issue.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that there is something obscene about the Government's proposals to cap benefits but not the bonuses for the bankers who created the financial crisis that we are now in?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Member for her intervention. It is clear, when you look at the policies being implemented by the Tory-Lib Dem Government, that they have no regard for and no real understanding of what the people whom we are talking about today are going through. Their friends are the bankers and the people on huge bonuses. They do not really know anybody who is on the breadline and have never dealt with anybody who is going to an appeal and needs support. They have also

never dealt with anybody who has had the benefits to which they were entitled taken away because of Atos. There is a real lack of understanding, and that is the context in which we find ourselves.

We ask, therefore, that as much support as possible be given to mitigate the real dangers of welfare reform and the effect of the all the other economic disadvantages that people face. Everybody in the Chamber knows about the good work being done by organisations on the ground. My office is getting busier and busier as people understand the implications that welfare reform will have for them. People do not really know and have not grasped how difficult this will be. The people on the front line are those from Citizens Advice, Advice NI and the resource centre in Derry and all who work tirelessly to assist those in greatest need. I hope that we do everything that we can to support them.

My colleague Mark Durkan touched on the issue of benefit uptake, and some good work has been done. However, Employers for Childcare recently told the OFMDFM Committee that around 232,000 families were not even aware that they were entitled to childcare benefits. People on the ground need to be aware of that, and we need to support those who are trying to make people aware of it. I want to —

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it is hard to understand why OFMDFM — the Department responsible for childcare — has not enacted an awareness-raising campaign throughout the community about the benefit advice and assistance that is available to parents to assist with childcare costs?

Mr Eastwood: It was shocking to hear that over 230,000 families had not been aware of or had not taken up their entitlements under the childcare provisions in the benefit system. I hope that OFMDFM will now increase awareness and help organisations such as Employers for Childcare to make people aware of the benefits to which they are entitled. We have called for that previously. I support the Member on that point.

I want to mention the Shantallow community benefit office, which Mr Brady referred to. Over time, the people in that benefits office have developed human knowledge and human expertise that is not in any way replaceable by a computer or a telephone conversation. We need to do all we can to support existing work, including the work that is going on in the

Department. I know that it is probably too late, but, at this very late stage, I implore the Minister to revisit that decision to try to ensure that the people whom I represent have as much opportunity as possible to avail themselves of support and advice. With that, I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Anderson: I speak as a recently reappointed member of the Committee for Social Development. I am on a steep learning curve with all the welfare reform that is taking place. The field of welfare benefits is vast, complex and rapidly changing. As MLAs with busy constituency advice centres, Members will be all too well aware that the welfare and benefits system is of great relevance to an increasing number of people. A significant percentage of my work as a public representative is taken up with advising and helping people with a range of entitlements.

We are now seeing the fallout from the reform of incapacity benefit, which more than 80,000 people in Northern Ireland claim. As a result of the recent changes, about 50% of them have had their case reviewed. Of these, some 12,500 have been told that they will lose their benefit as they are considered fit for work, and about 8,000 are appealing that decision. Many of those people are and will be coming to our constituency offices to seek help. That is just one example. We will obviously see more examples with the ongoing major welfare reform across the UK.

I broadly support the motion. It draws attention to the importance of ensuring that the public have access to relevant information about benefits and entitlements. We should all support that. The motion also asks for adequate funding. I am in favour of that, too, and a lot is already being done in that regard. People need to know about entitlements. As changes in the system continue to work their way through, there will be further pressures on all agencies and groups that offer advice. There are various ways in which we can provide information. We live in an age of instant communication. For most of us, it would be hard to imagine life without the internet, but, in the area of benefit entitlement and uptake, we deal with some of the most vulnerable, so we must make sure that advice is well targeted. Not everyone is online. Some people cannot afford to be. Others who live in isolated rural areas have poor internet provision or maybe do not have it at all. That is a separate issue that needs to be addressed. Also, not everyone has easy access to transport to visit Citizens Advice centres and other such places. We must advertise widely in the media, in newspapers

and on television and radio. Programmes such as 'On Your Behalf' on Radio Ulster are an excellent way of getting information across. In fact, a recent edition of that programme dealt with welfare reform.

The Minister has already shown and continues to show a high level of commitment to making sure that help is targeted and that people are aware of all that they are entitled to. I will highlight a few recent and ongoing initiatives. One of the Minister's first actions on his appointment in 2011 was to allocate extra funding to the Social Security Agency's benefit take-up programme. That has helped a lot of people to obtain help and support, largely in the age group of 60 and over. In these days of limited financial resources, it goes without saying that there is a clear need — more than ever before — for joined-up thinking and a joined-up approach between the various voluntary and community groups and the statutory agencies. There is a need for maximum efficiency. I know that the Opening Doors strategy aims to achieve all of that.

The Minister recently stated in the House that a further £3.5 million would be committed from 1 October 2012 to 31 March 2015 to the Northern Ireland Advice Services Alliance Consortium, which is made up of Advice NI, Citizens Advice NI and the Law Centre NI to provide regional support to the advice sector. The Minister's discussion paper 'Maximising Incomes and Outcomes' is also aimed at improving the uptake of benefits. I look forward to the Minister outlining a final plan on that in due course.

The Minister also allocates funding to councils through the community support programme. My council — Craigavon Borough Council — has received £326,000 from that programme. Of that, £58,169 is ring-fenced for advice service provision. The council has also allocated £104,266 of its funds, which means that Craigavon citizens advice bureau and LIAISE, an independent advice organisation, receive total funding of £163,435. Perhaps there is an increased role for local councils to play in that area, especially in light of the impending review of public administration.

Much is being done, and limited resources are being carefully targeted, but, as is always the case, we need to keep focused and ensure that the public are fully informed and get their financial entitlements. I support the motion.

1.15 pm

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I listened with interest to all the Members who spoke in the debate, and I thank all those who contributed for their input. I wish to respond to all the issues that were raised during the debate. However, if there are issues that I cannot cover in the detail requested, I will write to the Members concerned as soon as possible following the conclusion of the sitting.

I warmly welcome the debate and wish to respond positively to the motion. As Minister for Social Development, I have responsibility for urban regeneration and community development, in addition to housing, social security benefits, pensions and child maintenance. My Department is, therefore, to the fore in tackling issues of disadvantage, and, through everything that it does, it is directly involved in helping people and communities to improve their lives. I am fully committed to tackling disadvantage and to building strong and vibrant communities across Northern Ireland. In that context, I give a high priority to building capacity and to looking at measures that will mitigate the negative impacts of poverty on individuals and their families, households and communities.

Like all of you, I am acutely aware of the significant and complex changes that we are embarking on as a result of the reform of our welfare system, the consequences of which are likely to impact on most parts of our society. Let us ensure that we protect the most vulnerable, and let us work as a collective to mitigate the worst aspects of the planned changes and to deliver the best possible outcome for the people of Northern Ireland.

Our advice sector plays a vital role in supporting people through the changes that will arise from the welfare reforms. I fully recognise the challenges that this period of substantial change will bring for the advice sector in Northern Ireland. Those challenges are faced by government and the advice sector, and there is an onus on both to maximise the impact of scarce resources to ensure that individuals can readily access good advice services. I want to work — indeed, continue to work — with the advice sector organisations and to harness their excellent resource and expertise as we go forward.

My Department has devised and introduced a strategy for advice services in Northern Ireland. I note that the need for a strategy was mentioned. That strategy, known as Opening Doors, is geared to helping to support an integrated, quality advice service across Northern Ireland. The strategy is already there,

and it provides a framework to ensure that advice services are planned and delivered in a way that matches resources to need, focusing particularly on meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged. The key objectives of Opening Doors include maximising access to basic advice; resourcing the future of the advice sector; providing high-quality advice; and using existing resources effectively. I encourage all Members to get a copy of the strategy or to download it and study it carefully.

A key part of the advice strategy is the need for government to work in partnership with advice sector organisations to ensure the provision of good, easy-to-access services. My Department is already leading this work. As a first step, we asked the main advice-providing organisations in Northern Ireland to work together in partnership and as a consortium and to become a strategic partner with the Department in addressing issues on advice provision. This consortium is known as the Northern Ireland Advice Services Alliance Consortium, and its members are Citizens Advice, Advice NI and the Law Centre. The focus of our relationship with this advice consortium is to provide and target support for the provision of advice services to meet identified need.

Going forward, the advice consortium has a key role to play in building and supporting the capacity and capability of front line advice providers; securing joined-up and targeted service delivery; exploring alternative funding streams; and maximising the impact of the substantial resources that we have invested in advice. The advice consortium will also monitor advice activity on the ground and will let the Department know about emerging trends and issues. That will be supported by reliable information and statistics. That work is crucial if we are to target scarce resources to help claimants to deal with the impacts of welfare reform. Identifying and targeting the need for advice services in that way will allow government to respond in circumstances where specific robust evidence of changing demand has been identified. In other words, we want to make sure that those who need help get help.

Our work with the advice consortium and local councils means that we will be able to act appropriately when we begin to receive robust, reliable information detailing changes in demand for services. We will support advice providers so that they, in turn, can provide important support to our communities. My Department's commitment to providing access to advice services has seen us make a substantial financial commitment, in the region of £4.5 million each year, for advice provision:

general advice; benefit advice; housing advice; and advice to help people claim any benefits that they are entitled to.

Local councils also work with officials in my Department and provide an additional £1.9 million each year for front line advice services. Collectively, therefore, that brings a total investment of approximately £6.4 million each year, with that funding geared to ensuring that everyone in Northern Ireland has access to free, independent advice and that those providing the advice are trained to a high standard and are supported to enable them to carry out their role. That funding represents a substantial investment in advice services, and that should not be underestimated. For that reason, we do and will continue to monitor how the investment is spent to ensure that services are indeed reaching those in most need. That quite rightly takes the form of robust monitoring and review arrangements, and I make no apology for that. It is the right thing to do.

Beyond my own Department, many other Departments also provide funding for advice services, in keeping with their own departmental priorities. By way of example, DETI provides funding for specific debt advice, and the Department of Health provides funding to support a range of health advice services. Much of that work is complementary to the work of my Department and will help support claimants through the welfare reforms. I warmly welcome that.

As we move forward with the welfare reforms, I fully recognise the need to promote awareness and to keep individuals informed of changes. Once again, my Department is already leading the work, and plans are already at an advanced stage to ensure that appropriate arrangements for advice services are in place and that claimants are fully aware of the changes. We must use all channels open to us and consider different ways to reach communities. There is a need for the advice sector to consider the best way in which to provide good advice and easy access to it; for example, with greater use of information technology to support communication and service delivery.

In parallel with that partnership work with the advice sector, there is significant work being done in my Department to make sure that our claimants are fully aware of the changes ahead. I know of the anxiety and confusion that many in our society feel because there is uncertainty around welfare reform. I am committed to keeping individuals informed. We have a dedicated team already in place in the Social Security Agency to engage with all stakeholders

but particularly claimants and their representative groups.

In early spring, I will launch an awareness campaign on welfare reform that will include the distribution of an information leaflet to all households in Northern Ireland. It will provide important information on the current arrangements, the changes arising from welfare reform, who is likely to be affected and when the changes will happen. Together with the advice consortium, officials are also working with local councils to ensure that they are aware of changes and to give assurance to front line advice providers that monitoring processes are in place to ensure that they have the necessary support to deal with welfare reform queries when they begin to impact. The advice consortium, in collaboration with the Social Security Agency, will also provide training for front line advice providers on the changes resulting from welfare reform. Also, as part of the ongoing consultation on criteria for universal credit flexible payments and the introduction of discretionary support for Northern Ireland, my officials have undertaken a comprehensive programme of engagement with the voluntary and community sector and the general public.

My Department is committed to promoting benefit uptake, and in the past year alone our benefit uptake campaign has encouraged 4,000 mainly older people to claim additional support of £13.1 million through an awareness campaign and partnership working with the voluntary and community sector. We will also continue to provide advice and information through our Social Security Agency network. We provide advice and support to claimants through services available at their nearest jobs and benefits office and through the enhanced telephone service provided under Customer First. The agency provides accurate, timely and consistent information to claimants.

I know that there are concerns around welfare reform and housing. I have major concerns around the issues a reduction in housing benefit will cause, in particular the impacts of the underoccupation restriction for the social sector. I recognise that the coalition Government have brought forward these proposals and, in keeping with the principle of parity, we are compelled to do the same. I am keen to ensure that appropriate housing services are put in place, which is why I recently tasked the Housing Executive and housing association movement to bring forward an action plan that will provide a range of support measures to mitigate the welfare reform changes and support the households affected by them. I

recently brought those plans to the Executive subcommittee on welfare reform and asked Ministers to comment on their content.

I consider that early awareness of the extent of the changes to benefits will help households to prepare for reforms, anticipate their situation and smooth the demand for advice and support. The Housing Executive, as the body responsible for administering housing benefit, intends to write over the next few months and inform all affected households about the financial implications of the entitlement changes. That will include tenants living in housing association accommodation. My officials have worked closely with Housing Executive colleagues in order for them to be able to prepare specific leaflets for publication on the nature of the reforms. The intention is to use other supporting tools to communicate the changes, some of which are already up and running. They will include new website pages, an information video and an online calculator.

Mr Brady: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes, very quickly.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for giving way. Will he advise householders how to downsize to properties that are simply not there?

Mr McCausland: I have identified already that the issue of underoccupation causes us all concern. It is not actually what is before us today, but I acknowledge the Member's point.

A telephone contact service and housing advice service will be put in place to raise tenant awareness and to contact social tenants affected to help them consider their housing options. That will include — this perhaps goes some way towards addressing the previous point — promoting and assisting tenant mobility by helping them move to more appropriately sized housing; where possible, supporting tenants to pay their rent; examining options that can be put to tenants who need to move to a smaller home, consider downsizing etc; facilitating home swaps, promoting the mutual exchange scheme or advising on other initiatives; and putting in place plans and procedures for dealing with tenants who fall into arrears as a result of the reforms. In addition, further support for the various groups of people who may be impacted may be available by way of discretionary housing payments. The Housing Executive is looking at the current rules and procedures for such payments and intends to consult on future arrangements for their payment.

There are, indeed, challenging times ahead of us all: for our communities, for government and for advice providers. In my remaining minute and a half, I will pick up on a couple of points from the debate, including something that Mark Durkan said. It is important that our engagement with the consortium is detailed, consistent and ongoing. Beyond the quarterly detailed meetings, meetings are held monthly and, indeed, weekly with people from the sector. I took the opportunity on Friday to visit a citizens advice bureau in my constituency to hear from staff about their experience. So, work is ongoing there. The benefit uptake programme is a success. The Member spoke about Chinese whispers. Therefore, it is important that we provide as much information as possible, so that problems do not arise from rumours, unfounded reports or whatever.

Michael Copeland said that I was presiding over the progress of the Welfare Reform Bill. He then seemed to seek to detach or distance himself from welfare reform. I find that rather strange. I see that Michael Copeland has left us. It rather lacks credibility because I am sure that, as a good and loyal party member, at the last election he would have been out there campaigning on the doors and on the streets, day by day for the Ulster Conservatives and Unionists – New Force (UCUNF) candidate in his constituency. I have no doubt that —

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

Mr McCausland: —as a good candidate, he would have done that. I am sure that he would have. As a good, loyal member, he would not have done anything else; you could not expect it. Of course, he would always remember from those days that David Cameron and, if he had got somebody elected —

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

Mr McCausland: — he would have managed to find himself toeing the Tory line and implementing the Tory cuts.

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

1.30 pm

Mrs McKevitt: I am pleased to speak on the motion, and I pay a special thank you to all who contributed. Encouraging benefit uptake is of the utmost importance, especially as we are in the process of what has been described as the biggest shake up of the welfare system. "Confusing", "complicated" and "complex" —

those are the words that constituents of South Down use to describe the welfare system.

For every benefit application, a form needs to be completed, and, for our elderly in particular, that can be a daunting task. Many decide not to bother applying and take the attitude that they will probably not be any better off at the end. That attitude, in many instances, is wrong. It is up to us to ensure that individuals have access to independent advice and assistance on welfare so that people can receive all the benefits that they are entitled to. To make that possible, it is imperative that independent advice providers receive adequate funding.

I pay tribute to all independent advice providers. Citizens Advice and Advice NI are two such charities that come to mind. Both are real lifelines to many, and, since changes in the welfare system began, both have found themselves overwhelmingly inundated with calls from individuals seeking advice. The need for welfare assistance in my constituency is so great that my office now holds a welfare clinic on a Friday to give constituents an opportunity to speak to a professional welfare adviser who can assist and guide them through the maze of the benefit system.

I recognise the efforts of the Minister for Social Development to encourage benefit uptake through the development of specific programmes and campaigns, such as Make the Call, which increase benefit uptake numbers. The Social Security Agency's activities and information pamphlets have also gone some way to inform claimants of additional benefits, especially our society's most vulnerable, but we still have more to do to ensure that the people in our society know what benefits they could be entitled to.

I am pleased that we are shining a light on this important issue today. I understand that the consultation on the discussion paper 'Maximising Incomes and Outcomes' ended on 26 February, and I look forward to the implementation of the strategy. I support the call for the advice services strategy and further funding for independent advice providers, just like each of the Members who spoke today and are supportive of the motion.

Mark H Durkan spoke on the importance of advice centres, the service that they deliver and their importance to the public representatives. He spoke about the increasing demand that there will be with welfare reform change and said that 53% of over-16s are claiming benefits. He also spoke about the appeals, the work capability assessments and the way things

could be lost in the systems without the advice sector. He spoke about safeguarding those who are entitled to benefits, the mistrust of the statutory authorities, the new systems, like the IT processing systems, the community-based advice centres and the support that is needed for them.

Alex Maskey outlined the thoughts of the Committee on the key element of welfare reform. He talked about proper access to independent advice and how important that is for the claimant getting their benefits and entitlements, particularly around fuel poverty and childcare, where there is a lack of awareness around entitlements.

Paula Bradley spoke about the incoming welfare reforms, the misunderstanding around the changes, the scaremongering in local communities and the independent advice centres like Citizens Advice. She spoke about how good an example that is, and said that people need to be aware of where to go for advice.

Michael Copeland also spoke on the advice sector, the lack of resources and the vision for that sector. He spoke about the crucial role of independent advice centres, the 250,000 enquiries on the Welfare Reform Bill and the uncertainty around that.

Judith Cochrane spoke about the ongoing recession and the strain that it is causing. People are worried about the changes and need clarification around those. She also mentioned the appeals, the office cost expenditure decreasing and the increases that will cause to the advice services that come from constituency offices. The finances that will need to be available for the training were also mentioned.

Pam Brown spoke about how critical it is that every assistance is available to manage change in welfare reform, particularly around vulnerable groups and their future entitlement to benefits. She also spoke about the importance of awareness of childcare vouchers and thanked the Members for tabling the motion.

Mickey Brady spoke about the importance of advice centres and the shambles of work capability assessments. He spoke about welfare reform, universal credit and the cross-community work of advice centres. He also spoke about the closure of three community offices and how important those were to rural areas.

Colum Eastwood said that he was glad that there was support for the motion across the House. He spoke about the 120,000 children in poverty and said that there is no sense that that figure will get better. He talked about the concerns around welfare reform and said that we need to do everything that we can to help the 232,000 families who were not aware that they were entitled to childcare benefits.

Sydney Anderson spoke about the complex changes to welfare reform, the importance of advice centres and the 80,000 people who claim incapacity benefit. He went on to talk about how 50% of those cases were reviewed and the outcome of that. He also spoke about public access to, and advice about, benefits and the importance of that, particularly for the vulnerable in this society and people in rural areas. He spoke about the £3.5 million that was allocated to advice services in October 2012. The Minister also touched on that.

I am glad that the Minister has come here and spoken positively on the motion. After all, it is about helping people and communities. I am pleased that he is looking at measures. I welcome his commitments, his positive response to the motion and his recognition of the challenges ahead. I acknowledge his response about the strategy being in place, but it needs to be reviewed and revised in the context of welfare reform. I would like to think that the Minister will take that on board. I liked his attitude when he said that those who need help will get help. I have no doubt that everybody in the House will hold you to that comment.

I thank those who took part in the debate for all their support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the challenges facing the advice sector and the need for individuals to have access to advice and assistance in relation to their welfare rights; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to devise an advice services strategy, to develop an awareness campaign for individuals and to provide adequate funding for independent advice providers.

Draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

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 to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer of the amendment will have 10 minutes in which to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Nesbitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the publication of the draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; supports the commitment to bring to an end the practice of dual mandates; welcomes the recognition within the Bill that political donations in Northern Ireland require sensitivity; acknowledges that further work is needed on measures that are still under consideration for potential inclusion in the Bill, including the creation of a formal Opposition in the Assembly, the size of the Assembly and the length of the Assembly term; and calls on all political parties which support inclusive and consensual politics to play a full role at Westminster or to forfeit the expenses that they claim from Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I hope that you will give me a little latitude to begin by paying tribute to Sir George Quigley, who very sadly passed away quite suddenly yesterday. Sir George was a remarkable man. He was a leading civil servant, then a leading a businessman and, in a third career, a leading civic leader for Northern Ireland. Sir George Quigley was a true polymath. I had hoped that we would discuss him as a matter of the day. I am irked, and I think that it is deeply ironic, that what we ended up discussing was the mortar find in Londonderry, which focused us on people who have nothing to offer Northern Ireland as opposed to Sir George, who spent a lifetime trying to build a better future. I pay tribute to him and send the sympathies of the party to Lady Moyra.

The draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is an opportunity to build a better future, and I hope that we will not let it slip because it is a true opportunity to take the next bold steps towards normalisation and the introduction of normal politics in this House and for these institutions. It is timely, coming 15

years after the Belfast Agreement, which brought the original Assembly to the Chamber. However, the arrangements of 15 years ago were always meant to be transitional, to help us on a journey, which we are still on, towards normalisation.

Therefore, when defining the success of the draft Bill, we need to focus on the underlying values and principles that we supported 15 years ago: the spirit of the agreement; the fact that Northern Ireland is secure as part of the United Kingdom for as long as the majority of the people here so wish; the primacy of the rule of law; politics is for all, but terror is for none, although, sadly, some still think that terrorism is the way forward; mutual respect; inclusivity; and consensual politics. Those elements make up the spirit of the Belfast Agreement, which my party continues to support. The time is ripe to review how far we have come in the past 15 years and how far we have yet to go. As I said, the 2013 draft Bill is an opportunity to reflect on where we are and where we need to go.

We have tinkered with, some would say corrupted, what was put in place and agreed by referendum in 1998. At St Andrews in 2006, many changes were introduced that we could not support as a party, not least the corruption of the election on a joint ticket of the First and the deputy First Ministers, which parties now play to their advantage at election time. Another change was the introduction of checks and balances, which some Ministers have mentioned in the past couple of weeks. That is one reason why the processes of the Executive and the House are so slow that people fail to see any semblance of delivery.

In 2010, of course, we had Hillsborough and the decision to devolve policing and justice powers, which the Ulster Unionist Party opposed. We feel vindicated in the rationale for our opposition on hearing over the past few weeks the debate about the National Crime Agency (NCA) and the fact that Northern Ireland is to be the only part of the United Kingdom where the agency will not operate to protect our citizens' lives and well-being.

So, in short, although the draft Bill presents an opportunity, as currently constituted, it lacks a certain ambition. We should be more ambitious in calling on the Secretary of State to take those steps to normalisation, and the biggest and most significant single step that she could take would be to support the establishment of an official opposition in the House: an opposition loyal to the institutions of devolution.

What would that mean? It would not mean a return to majority rule. The Ulster Unionist Party is clear that, if we introduce an official opposition, you will still need a cross-community Government. That is guaranteed as far as this party is concerned. An official opposition would offer choice and would be given some resources, so we are not talking about a party simply walking away from the Executive, which is an idea that some of my former colleagues have promoted. We are talking about the establishment of an officially recognised opposition. What does that mean? It means having the same as in Dublin, London, Cardiff and Edinburgh: supply days, speaking rights, research resources and all the normal support that an opposition has.

I said that, 15 years ago, we went for a set of transitional arrangements. The challenge back then was to get everybody into the political tent. Now that we are all in, the challenge is to look at and acknowledge the unmet challenges from 1998: dealing with the past, reconciliation and a truly shared future. All might be best addressed by the formation of a Government and an official opposition. I call on the Secretary of State to review her draft Bill and to push ahead to create the space called "opposition" that will take us on that huge step towards normalisation in this House.

The Bill should be about more than moving to end dual mandates and transparency on political donations, important as those are. The Ulster Unionist Party has led the way in the ending of dual mandates at some cost to itself — *[Interruption.]* The Member may find that amusing, but history will not.

Mr McDevitt: I think that electorate sorted that out for you.

Mr Nesbitt: That is a very cheap shot coming in from South Belfast. The party took a principled stand, as we did in 1998, and we were prepared to take the cost to our party to stand on principle.

1.45 pm

I will move on to transparency in political donations. I think that every party would like to see transparency, but we must have the conditions that allow it. In our view, those conditions do not exist, and we direct you to Londonderry and the events of the past 24 hours. Terrorism is still a threat in many ways.

If we are looking for true transparency, let us have transparency from our own Executive,

which still will not tell us how many people accompanied the First and deputy First Minister on their trade mission to China, what hotels they stayed in, what class of travel they undertook or the cost to the taxpayer. The same Executive will not publish business cases so that Members of this Assembly can examine, scrutinise and decide whether a robust case was put forward for the spending of public money on, for example, the Victims and Survivors Service. That Executive will not even publish the research that they commissioned from Colliers International into whether Maze/Long Kesh should be the venue for a peace-building and reconciliation centre. What do they have to hide that means that they cannot be transparent? So, the Ulster Unionist Party wishes to see provision for opposition in the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

We also call for those who support inclusive and consensual politics to play a full role at Westminster or to sacrifice their expenses. According to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, expenses claimed by Sinn Féin MPs in the financial year 2011-12 were as follows: Pat Doherty claimed £135,000; Michelle Gildernew claimed £99,000; Martin McGuinness, the deputy First Minister, claimed £108,000; Paul Maskey claimed £92,000; and Conor Murphy claimed £131,000. That is a total of £569,000. In addition, there was £100,000 in the equivalent of short money. Clearly, those are matters for the House of Commons, but it will not be lost on that House that Sinn Féin's decision to stand down its double-jobbing MPs and MLAs was about maxing office cost allowances and expenses.

If I were an Irish republican, I could imagine how I could have made an argument some time ago for abstentionism, particularly at Westminster. Perhaps the conditions at one point existed for that. However, they do not exist any more — not since the Belfast Agreement and not since people such as Peter Brooke talked about the United Kingdom not having any further "selfish ... or strategic interest" in Northern Ireland. As a tactic, abstentionism has had its day.

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

Mr Nesbitt: I say to the Members on the opposite Benches: take your seats or give up your expenses. I encourage all those who will vote in Mid Ulster on Thursday to vote for a candidate who will be a full-time Member of Parliament.

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

Mr Dickson: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out from "welcomes" to "sensitivity" and substitute

"believes that the declaration and publication of donations to political parties in Northern Ireland should be handled in the same manner as donations to political parties in Great Britain".

Currently, Members of this House must report to the Electoral Commission details of any donations from permissible sources over £1,500, and political parties in Northern Ireland have to contribute information to the commission about donations of over £7,500 from a single source. However, the names of donors are not made public, as they are in the rest of the United Kingdom.

My party, the Alliance Party, has made a voluntary commitment to publish information in line with the United Kingdom arrangements and has followed through on that commitment. In April last year, my party colleague Naomi Long MP asked the Prime Minister to commit to changing the legislation to make local parties publish their list of significant donors. We believe that the public in Northern Ireland should have access to the same information as people in England, Scotland and Wales on how political parties are funded and who their major donors are. The public can then judge for themselves whether those donors have any undue influence on party policy. It is important that parties be open and transparent about how they are funded.

Legislation designed for the worst of the Troubles needs now to be amended to reflect the fact that Northern Ireland has moved significantly. We cannot, on the one hand, talk about normalisation and tell people that Northern Ireland has transformed into a safe destination for inward investment and tourism and require companies to publish their accounts and details of their directors and shareholders, and, on the other hand, use security concerns as a reason to avoid being transparent about party political donations. The time for that is over. Now is the time, and the challenge that I give to every party in this House, bar one that has done the same as the Alliance Party, is to publish your donations in line with the commission's recommendations. Stop hiding your donations.

It is worth noting that the vast majority of donors would not be affected in any way by the change bringing us into line with Great Britain, because only larger donations need to be declared. It is important to recognise that similar information is already in the public domain, because the names of those who nominate and sign nomination papers for election are published and always have been published, right through all the terrible times that we have come through. Therefore, the security argument simply does not wash. If others are serious about openness and transparency, I encourage them to support our amendment and to join us in supporting a change in the law at Westminster to bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. In the interim, I urge all parties to follow our example and publish that information voluntarily.

I turn now to the rest of the motion. The Alliance Party has also acted voluntarily to end MP/MLA mandates, with Naomi Long stepping down within weeks of being elected to Westminster. We do not believe that MPs should be permitted to continue as Members of the Assembly. It was argued that the instability of the Assembly structures put the mandate of senior political figures at risk in the event of the collapse of these institutions following a resignation from Westminster. That is arguably redundant, given that we are well into the second successive uninterrupted term of the Assembly. No Members of the Scottish Parliament or Welsh Assembly sit in the House of Commons, and we should follow suit. An MLA and an MP are two separate, distinct and full-time jobs, requiring a focus that cannot be effectively achieved if a representative has a dual mandate and, consequently, competing demands on his or her time. The situation is further exacerbated where that MP is also a Minister in the Executive.

As MLAs, we must be here in Stormont to vote on legislation, to question our Ministers, to attend and engage with Committees and to hold the Executive to account. That is what we were elected to this House to do. Equally, MPs are required in Westminster for a large proportion the week to vote, scrutinise and provide a voice for their constituents in that place. Although there are many considerable overlaps in the constituency casework element of both, the location and time of those parliamentary duties make it incompatible for any Member to fulfil both roles simultaneously. They are simply not doing their job, and I challenge any Members of Parliament or of the Assembly who hold that dual role to tell me that they are doing their job effectively.

No person can be in two places at once. That is evidenced by the attendance and voting record of those who have held or continue to hold dual mandates in this Parliament compared with those who do not. Moreover, ending dual mandates provides an opportunity for parties to introduce new talent and to make our parliamentary Chambers more representative. We talk an awful lot about trying to get people interested in politics. Here is a way of freeing up some jobs and encouraging new talent into the pool of politics in Northern Ireland. It is a step that we can take to achieve that aim.

Finally, the reduction in the amount of office cost expenditure available to an MLA who is also an MP means that the number of staff members and the amount of resources available to someone with a dual mandate is greatly reduced when compared with two representatives undertaking each role separately. Some may argue that that allows for efficiency in expenditure, but we are concerned that constituents in areas represented by those holding dual mandates will have less access to, and potentially less assistance from, offices of elected representatives.

Related to that is the level of representation provided by those who do not take their seat in Westminster. They may argue that they have a mandate for that stance; indeed, that may be what the majority view of those who elected you is. However, what about all those constituents who have not voted for you but are entitled to equal representation? That representation requires you to go to Westminster and represent them. They are meant to represent all their constituents; after all, few, if any, elected representatives tell us that they do anything else other than represent all their constituents. What about the important issues, such as welfare reform, that are being debated and decided at Westminster? The position of not taking one's seat is extremely irresponsible. The people of those constituencies deserve better.

On the size of the Assembly, we have made our position clear on a number of occasions. Others need to bring similar clarity to the table, if we are going to move forward, and also on the issue of the extension of the term of the Assembly to avoid unnecessary clashes with other elections.

Finally, on the subject of an opposition, it has long been the view of the Alliance Party, throughout the talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent negotiations

and reforms, that democracy in Northern Ireland would be best served by a properly funded, properly structured, formal opposition. We are not opposed to enabling legislation being put in place. However, we are possibly many years away from that actually being formulated. Opposition is already enshrined, to an extent, in the Committee system in the House. Evidence we recently received at the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) made clear the difficulties faced in establishing an effective and formal opposition here.

It is clear that that will require significant debate and discussion. I welcome the fact that that debate is ongoing. However, given the divided nature of society, it would be a sign of politics maturing if we were able to effect a transition towards a Government and opposition model of governance. We recognise that the current system was endorsed as part of the Good Friday Agreement, that any transition requires the consent of the Assembly and that we certainly need to move beyond the sectarian headcount style of politics that has been demonstrated recently, if we are to facilitate an effective and formal opposition based on a voluntary agreement. Remember, one of the tenets of an opposition is the ability to one day become the Government. We support the motion and encourage Members to support our amendment.

Mr Givan: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion. I will just pick up on a couple of points that the proposer of the motion outlined. It is an opportunity for normal politics to be established. However, I think that the proposer of the motion would need to check with his party as to why, in the Belfast Agreement, it did not put in that it was only ever going to be transitional. If it had, we would not now be requiring a change to come through Westminster. Had that been achieved at the Belfast Agreement, one could take more credence with the argument about this being a transitional arrangement. However, I agree with the argument that this should be transitional. A more normalised form of democracy in Northern Ireland is something that we would wish to see.

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

The proposer indicated that the St Andrews Agreement corrupted the Belfast Agreement. We reject that. He indicated that, at Hillsborough, the party was right to oppose the devolution of policing and justice at that time. I remind the Member that the Ulster Unionist

Party had signed up to policing and justice, many years before, at a previous deal that was done. Then, the elections happened, and that did not happen. It is important that we put forward arguments but that we do not expose ourselves to the inconsistent approach that is being taken now to try to rewrite a little bit of history.

That having been said, the motion is an opportunity for the Bill going through Westminster to try to make changes. I agree with the argument that we have overlapping elections. It is not, for one moment, that we disagree, for our own political advantage, with Westminster and Assembly elections taking place at the same time. Indeed, one could argue that, in those types of elections, our big hitters usually poll better than Assembly Members and that, therefore, we would get a bounce in the Assembly if that were the case.

So, it certainly is not from the point of view of political advantage, but we take the argument that there is overlapping and that it is better to have an election on a separate date. It is what happens in Scotland and Wales, and we think it should happen in Northern Ireland so that we get that distinction. We can then have an election based on Assembly issues, as opposed to being clouded between a Westminster election and the Assembly. That is something that I would like to see the Bill change.

2.00 pm

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree that we should decouple Westminster elections from Assembly elections. However, does he not agree that it would be better to bring Assembly elections forward, rather than putting them back a year? I do not think that we can have too much democracy, but I think that there is a genuine issue of a democratic deficit, were we to be in term for a year longer than we were elected to be.

Mr Givan: The Member makes a point that is worth considering. One may say that Members stood for election for a four-year term, and to shorten that is not why we put ourselves before the electorate. However, this party fears no election being called early. That certainly is not an issue for us. From an electoral point of view, we are confident that the positions that we have taken resonate with the people. However, the Member's point is certainly worth considering.

We do not wish to have a return to majority rule. That is an argument that we made at the

Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC). That is not what we want. We have outlined where we think we can reach some kind of consensus around a type of weighted majority system that would ensure that a minority community will always be protected. It may be develop a better form of democracy than that which currently exists in this place, and that is something that I think should be explored.

It is important to say that, if we can get agreement in the Assembly, it is much more likely that we can make the point to the Secretary of State in taking the Bill through. She has made it clear that she will not force through some sort of change. So the onus is on us, in the Assembly, to find common ground so that we can make agreements that, ultimately, the Secretary of State can implement. That is something that we would wish to see happen. Those discussions are ongoing, and I encourage everybody to be part of them in a positive manner.

It is worth pointing out that this party, which has Members of Parliament, has led the way with respect to dual mandates. It is easy for the Ulster Unionist Party to take a principled stand on this, now that the electorate has taken care of any MPs that it had. However, we have withdrawn most of our MPs from the Assembly. We led on that, and it is our policy that, ultimately, that should be carried into effect.

The Conservative Party, however, would do well, when it talks about double-jobbing, to look at its Front Bench and identify how many Tory Ministers are also on executive boards. Some of those Ministers receive much more financial gain from the activities that they are involved in outside of politics, and then that party could take a more principled position in talking about double-jobbing. It would be consistent if the Conservative Party were to take that forward in the Bill as well, and deal with those Members of Parliament who are not doing their job in the Conservative Party, when it comes to focusing solely on their duties at Westminster.

We can have an opposition here. However, I say to Members that the two smaller parties in the Executive have access to confidential papers which then seem to make their way into the public domain. So there is a sham fight taking place; the smaller parties want an opposition on one hand but, when they get information, they do not subject themselves to collectivity the way the rest of us, the two bigger parties that are trying to push Northern Ireland forward, have to do. So, if the smaller parties take themselves out of the Executive,

they can have their opposition. I agree that should be properly resourced and we should have an official-type opposition. However, you cannot have it both ways. If you are in the Executive, take your collective agreements and sign up to that collectivity, or else you decide, officially —

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

Mr Givan: — to go outside the Executive and be in the opposition.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I wish to speak against this motion.

From the outset, I thought that the speech by the leader of the UUP was going to be a thinly veiled attack on Sinn Féin. Those fears were confirmed in the last three minutes of his speech, which were aimed at Sinn Féin. He also raised the issue of the NCA. I do not want to stray from the motion too far, but I stand in awe of the Member's toughness against crime. I still wonder when he will come out and condemn the illegal blockading of our roads over the last few months, but we will wait for that. Also, I presume that the Member would like to write Sinn Féin's manifesto as well as his own. Sinn Féin is very clear in its manifesto: it has a clear policy on abstentionism, and I say that also to the Member from the Alliance Party. Do you expect us to say that we are an abstentionist party and then go and take our seats? Of course not. Do we still represent our constituents? Of course we do. Do we get paid expenses in the same way as every other party for representing constituents? Yes we do, and there is no reason why those expenses should be withdrawn.

I will look at a couple of other issues in the motion. There is the issue of political donations. Of course, Sinn Féin stands for transparency — complete transparency — unlike the other parties in the Assembly that are humming and hawing about it. Let us be clear: we want complete transparency, and I think that we are the only party in the Assembly that has called for that. When we talk about an opposition, it seems that the first item on the agenda is resources. Would the party show some principle now and again and say, "We are pulling out of the Executive and are going into opposition, whether or not we are resourced for it"? However, it is all about expenses going into the back pocket.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. I encourage him to read Hansard tomorrow,

because he will see that the first issue that I raised was supply days, not resources or money.

Mr Sheehan: I will not quibble about whether it was said first or second. The Member said that an opposition should be given some resources.

I will move on to dual mandates and the great leadership that has been given by the other parties in the House about ending dual mandates. I must have missed something along the way, particularly from the Ulster Unionists and their leadership on ending dual mandates, because I thought that the electorate did that job for them. However, I will stand corrected on that if I am wrong. Sinn Féin is the only party in the House that has ended dual mandates. Let us be clear about this —

Mr Allister: Is that including the IRA?

Mr Sheehan: Let us be clear about double-jobbing because there seems to have been a redefinition somewhere along the line.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. The Member will resume his seat. I heard remarks from the back that were not appropriate to the debate. I do not expect to hear them again. The Member may continue.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it in order in the House — certainly it should not be done from a sedentary position, I understand that — to point out the duplicity of Sinn Féin? I am referring to the double mandate that it claimed for years for terror, manifest in membership both of the IRA and Sinn Féin.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I take it that the Member wished to make a contribution to the debate. That certainly was not a point of order. My function is to ensure, as far as possible, that Members stay on the motion, and I am sure that all Members will support me in that.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We are used to that type of sniping from the Back Benches. Nevertheless, we will try to carry on as best we can.

There has been a redefinition of dual mandates, or double-jobbing, somewhere along the line, which I have missed. It is not only the double-jobbing of Westminster MPs and MLAs in the Assembly but the double-jobbing of MLAs and councillors. I wonder whether the leader of the Ulster Unionists would like to stand up now — I

will give way if he wants me to — and tell me whether he has done away with that double-jobbing. That is as important as double-jobbing between MPs and MLAs.

We do not support the motion, and we do not think that the amendment from the Alliance Party makes any substantive change to it. On that basis, we will oppose both.

Mr McDevitt: To date, the debate has been slightly bizarre. There is a Committee in the House called the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. I am a member of it, Mr Sheehan is a member of it and Mr Givan is a member of it. I cannot remember whether the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party is currently a member, but he certainly has been. What has that Committee been tasked to do for the past six months but review the operation of Parts 3 and 4 of the Northern Ireland Act and deal with some of the issues provided for in the proposed legislation from Westminster? Why would any parliamentarian with any respect for any Committee in the House table a motion that seeks to pre-empt, compromise and prejudice the debate taking place in that Committee?

We know that the Ulster Unionist Party is confused about its commitment to the Good Friday Agreement. It is ironic that the Assembly and Executive Review Committee is one of only two Committees mentioned in the Northern Ireland Act that arose from the Good Friday Agreement, but you would think that, irrespective of how dodgy that party may be on the substantive issue of whether it is pro-agreement, anti-agreement, pseudo-agreement or post-agreement, it would at least respect the integrity of this institution and the Committees mandated by this Assembly and plenary to do certain jobs of work. On that ground alone, the motion deserves to be defeated today. The debate is not one for the Chamber; it is one for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which would prepare a report that should, and must, be debated in the Chamber in due course.

I have to say that hearing the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party appeal to the House to support the values of the Good Friday Agreement and then call for support and votes for the unionist unity candidate in Mid Ulster on Thursday was hearing a man say, on the left hand, that he is in favour of 1998 and, on the right hand, that an anti-agreement man should be voted into Westminster. Which is it? Whatever happened to the noble strand of Irish unionism that was proud to have made an honourable agreement with Irish nationalism, or is that now just the job of the Alliance Party?

Stewart Dickson said that we needed to do like the rest of Great Britain. We are not in Great Britain. That is the point. We may be in the UK by consent, but we are not in Great Britain, and we do not have to do the same as Great Britain. That is not the point of devolution. The point of devolution is that the House makes rules in the interests of the people of this region, and the people of this region live in Northern Ireland. It is constitutionally part of the UK and geographically part of Ireland, and coming to the House with amendments that confuse the two in the most cack-handed way possible is short-sighted.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will in a second.

It is short-sighted and falls into the trap laid by the Ulster Unionist Party: "We want to sound pro-agreement but act anti-agreement. We want to sound like we stand for a shared future, but, in fact, we would quite like the tribalism to continue because it suits our politics." I will say to all parties in the House that they should be careful to play that game. Be careful to position yourself in a place that relies on everyone else being something else for you to be something. Be careful about undermining this institution and allowing an amendment to a motion, which anyone with a titter of wit knows is designed to prejudice and undermine the work of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with his point that we do not have to follow GB for the sake of doing so, but, if the GB system, whereby all political donations above a certain level are published, is more democratic, does the Social Democratic and Labour Party not agree that that is a good idea?

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Agnew for his intervention. I will happily deal with the disclosure of donations. The SDLP's submission to the Northern Ireland Office consultation on this matter is absolutely clear: we do not oppose the disclosure of donations.

2.15 pm

However, we also live in Northern Ireland, and in Northern Ireland today there is extortion. It is taking place not necessarily in those constituencies where Mr Dickson may have some electoral presence but in others. It is a sad reality of where we are.

Let us remember that mortar bombs were seized last night on the way to attacking a police station. This, I wish I could say, is a stable democracy where we can abandon all the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement and live in some sort of democratic nirvana. However, the evidence suggests that it is not. The evidence suggests that we have a huge amount of work to do to eradicate violence, the threat of violence and a culture of coercion from our society. The evidence suggests —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McDevitt: I will not, Mr Dickson, because I have given way once already.

The evidence suggests that we have a lot more investment to make in upholding the institutions and true values of the Good Friday Agreement. Frankly, everyone in the House who is in office must —

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

Mr McDevitt: — remember, acknowledge and honour the fact that they are in office only because of the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Weir: I support the motion and oppose the amendment. Perhaps I could start with some of the remarks that the Member who spoke previously made. I find myself disagreeing with him on one point and probably agreeing with him on another.

If the motion were a clear attempt to undermine the AERC's work, we would not be supporting it. However, I think that it stands on its own merits. The motion refers to legislation that is potentially going through Westminster. I think that it is right that we comment on that. That does not undermine the good work that the AERC has to do. Indeed, the motion identifies a number of issues that the AERC will, I think, need to tackle.

I agree with the Member who spoke previously on the import of the amendment. It is clear that the amendment looks towards an idealised world that I am sure that we would all like to embrace. However, we have to deal with Northern Ireland as it is today. It is undoubtedly the case that elected representatives from across the Chamber and, indeed, others, have been subject to various attacks, intimidation and extortions. What confidence could we have in this society that full disclosure of political donations would not at least create the perception or, indeed, very real fear among a

lot of people that they could be targeted by extremists, or, at the very least, that a businessperson making a donation to one party would then suffer a backlash or be boycotted?

The alternative is that, unless we see donations dealt with in a proper manner through normal procedures, we will be left back in a situation where we are depending more and more on the state to pay political parties. I think that that is something that —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr Dickson: That amuses me. I and my party have been subjected to abuse and intimidation over the past few months, yet I am standing here four-square supporting the open declaration of political donations. There is international terrorism in the rest of the United Kingdom. There are people from different backgrounds and communities right across England, Scotland and Wales who make donations to political parties and who will have people from their communities oppose what they do. The argument simply does not wash.

Mr Weir: I am glad that, if I have achieved at least one thing in this debate, I have amused Mr Dickson. The reality is that you cannot put the situation in Northern Ireland on a par with what happens across the water. The idea that parties there may be subject to international terrorism does not relate to what happens here. If we are talking about people being under threat, people from across the Chamber have been under threat from different sources for decades. That is nothing new, and that threat persists.

If the Member said that he was amused, I was somewhat amused by the reference by one of the Members on the opposite Benches that Sinn Féin declared that it is now in favour of complete transparency. That would be a very welcome development in this debate. Although it may or may not be in favour of complete transparency when it comes to donations, it seems to have a complete lack of transparency when it comes to anything to do with its past. A veil of amnesia comes down when anything is mentioned about past or current involvement in any activity. We need only look at the denials of some of the leaders of Sinn Féin, who must have been on holiday for the past 40 years, because they appear to have had no level of involvement whatsoever.

One of the key parts of the motion urges people to play a full role at Westminster. Criticism has been made of the joint unionist candidate in Mid Ulster. Along with others in the Chamber, I am proud to support that candidate. The reality is that that candidate is offering something else, which his main alternative cannot. He is offering representation at Westminster. I hope that he is elected. If he is not elected, I hope that the Members opposite will have a change of heart and that their Members will take —

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: No, I have given way already. If people are not doing their job, they should not be getting paid or getting allowances for it. Indeed, it is something that was raised by the Conservative Government in the past. I believe that it is something that should be carried through in this legislation. There is no doubt that the party opposite is very up front in its policy of abstention, but it should suffer the consequences of that. It should not be getting allowances for not doing its job, as would be the case if any one of us was boycotting this House.

The motion contains a range of other issues. Obviously, there is reference to a formal opposition. At present, there is the opportunity for anybody to be part of the opposition. If it would be helpful to have that in a more formalised or funded way, or in a more structured way for debates, I would not have a particular problem with it. That is a matter that clearly needs to be discussed.

The number of Departments and the size of the Assembly are going to be issues for debate. From a financial point of view, a lot of people out there are suffering because of the austerity that has to be there. It is right that we look at our systems of government and ensure that we are providing the best value for money. We should look at the number of Departments, for example, and ask, "Can we deliver this in a better way?" If people are suffering on the ground, they want at least some of that pain to be shared all around. The House cannot be immune to that. Nor can we be so ossified in our views about our structures that 1998 can become some form of holy writ that cannot be changed.

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

Mr Weir: As such, I have no problem, and I am happy to support the motion but oppose the amendment.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Táimid i gcoinne an rúin agus an leasaithe. We are opposed to the motion and the amendment, as Pat Sheehan has already indicated.

Some would prefer to pretend that they do not support the Good Friday Agreement, but it is a very carefully crafted agreement, with its checks and balances to ensure maximum representation. It is important for people to look at the majority of constituencies in the North as currently represented, because they will see that we have representatives from a number of political parties.

The agreement also enshrines equality, mutual respect and parity of esteem. I listened to Paul Givan wax lyrical about how DUP Members are not for majority rule and how somehow they want to support equality. However, we just have to look at the way in which they abused power in the Assembly Commission in a desperate attempt during the recent flag debacle. Therefore, I am interested to see what the Members opposite can do to reassure people from the nationalist/republican community about how they would ensure equality, given the sad record over the past number of years, particularly prior to 1998, in this Building, when it was a very, very cold house for nationalists and republicans.

In any arrangements that we have, Sinn Féin wants to see maximum equality, maximum parity of esteem and fair play, not only for nationalists, unionists and republicans but for people from ethnic minorities and the new communities that have come to this part of Ireland.

I move now to political donations. I think that it is hilarious. We have Mike Nesbitt jumping up and down waxing lyrically about transparency, good governance and all the rest, yet it is obvious that he is not in favour of transparency when it comes to donations. Sinn Féin is not afraid of maximum transparency. We welcome it. It leads to good governance and to people understanding who the funders of parties are and why they might be funding them.

I note Mike Nesbitt's and, indeed, Paul Givan's comments. What we have heard are excuses. I also noted Conall McDevitt's comments. I am also a member of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee. Conall McDevitt is for transparency, yet he is using the excuse of security for not having transparency. Yes; there are issues with security. However, Stewart Dickson made a very valid point, which I will

share. Members of my party, including me, have had threats. Members of his party have had threats. Yet, we are not afraid of transparency. We are not afraid to lead.

I am disappointed. Although I support the principle — I suppose, the spirit — of Stewart's amendment, I agree with points that were made by Conall McDevitt: it could have been crafted better. Had it been, my party would have supported it because we absolutely support transparency on political donations. I ask the Member to take that away for future amendments.

On dual mandates, I note that Mike Nesbitt did not take up Pat Sheehan's challenge. In fact, I remember when, in a previous Executive, a Bill was going through, and his party's two Ministers had to leave the Executive due to a conflict of interest. They were Ministers, MLAs and councillors. It is the same with the party opposite; there were Ministers who were MLAs and councillors. It was the same with the SDLP. That is nothing short of ludicrous. Those parties do not even have an abstentionist policy. How could those Members be expected to be at Westminster, Stormont and local councils? Well, the attendance record speaks for itself.

Sinn Féin has made no secret of its abstentionist policy. Just look at the party's history since its foundation. Since 1905, all party members who have been elected to Westminster have been elected on an abstentionist ticket. Our electorate know and understand that. They continue to vote for us. We do not agree with British interference in Ireland. We believe that there should be a united Ireland. We are actively working towards that and make no secret of the fact.

Peter Weir went on about the past. I have yet to hear from his party a critique of the state forces and what they did in the past, which included collusion, the shoot-to-kill policy and torture.

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

Ms Ruane: Sinn Féin has said, yes, let us deal with the past.

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

Ms Ruane: Let us deal with it comprehensively.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time begins at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House

takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Mr Raymond McCartney.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 8, 9, 10 and 11 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust: Grafton Recruitment

1. **Ms Fearon** asked the Minister of Justice whether any members of the board of directors of the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust have been involved, on behalf of the PSNI, in contractual negotiations, tender evaluations and/or approval of contracts with Grafton Recruitment for the provision of agency, consultancy and associate staff. (AQO 3515/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The PSNI director of human resources joined the board of directors of the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT) in 2002 as the PSNI's representative. He was involved in the tender evaluation processes in 2002 and 2008 for the award of contracts to Grafton Recruitment for the provision of agency, consultancy and associate staff to the PSNI.

Ms Fearon: Go raibh maith agat. As the Minister knows, the PSNI recently awarded a contract to Grafton worth £20 million without open competition. Does he agree that the 'Managing Public Money' (MPM) guidelines raise serious questions about the role of a public servant in awarding contracts if they are a member of another organisation that has a relationship with that contractor? Can he confirm that the involvement of the trust in arranging training for retired police officers to be rehired is not what it is publicly funded to do by his Department?

Mr Ford: I thank Ms Fearon for that supplementary question. The reality is that there are two different issues. The first one is the issue that has been explored by the Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). We are waiting to see the final report on the operation of the PSNI in relation to the recruitment of agency staff. The second one is the PRRT issue, and nothing that I have seen suggests that PRRT has behaved inappropriately in the way it has managed its business.

Mr McDevitt: Maybe I will press the Minister a little bit on this issue. In the Minister's opinion, is it a conflict of interest if a senior official of a procuring authority is party to the decisions to procure services from another organisation in which he has a directorial role?

Mr Ford: No, I do not believe that there is a conflict of interest in the way that has been outlined. It is obviously for the individual directors of PRRT to note the issues as to whether there is a conflict of interest as they perceive their operation. In the context where the individual concerned is specifically there as a representative of the PSNI and has no direct personal financial interest, that clearly is not what would normally be regarded as a conflict of interest.

Mr Swann: In regard to the contract negotiations, can the Minister outline whether the contracts through Grafton for agency staff in the PSNI attract the same pay scale as those for regular police officers?

Mr Ford: The issue of pay scales is entirely between Grafton and its employees. On that basis, I, as Minister, do not have any information.

Burglaries: Foyle

2. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Justice how many burglaries there have been in the Foyle constituency area over the past two years. (AQO 3516/11-15)

Mr Ford: Statistics on recorded crime are maintained by the PSNI. I am advised by the PSNI that there were 308 domestic burglaries in the Foyle policing area in 2011 and 405 in 2012. For burglaries in buildings other than dwellings, the figures were 208 in 2011 and 208 in 2012. The PSNI has advised that the in-year figures for 2012 are provisional and may be revised.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the Chamber earlier today, many other Members and I praised the work of the police in Foyle in foiling an attempt on life last night. Will the Minister assure the House that police and community police in Foyle are adequately resourced to tackle day-to-day crimes such as burglary?

Mr Ford: The Chief Constable assures me that he has adequate resources to deal with his day-to-day policing pressures. Clearly, there are

issues, and we have highlighted those in the Chamber many times. There are particular issues relating to Derry as the City of Culture and, as we sadly noted earlier this morning, there are specific issues relating to terrorist activity in Derry. However, the Chief Constable has assured me that he has adequate resources. It should be noted that things such as domestic burglary are continuing to decline significantly across Northern Ireland generally. However, in individual districts, there are the inevitable upward or downward blips year on year.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree that if a focused team were in place in any constituency to deal with burglaries, the detection rate would be higher and the instances of burglaries would decrease?

Mr Ford: I certainly agree that Ms McLaughlin has a point in that regard. That is why a campaign relating to domestic burglary issues is being undertaken in Derry. There are issues that also come across to the policing and community safety partnership (PCSP). There is one major problem in that Derry has a difficulty that does not apply to other places: there is a very high rate of creeper burglaries because people simply do not lock doors and windows. Sadly, these days, particularly in urban areas, people cannot afford to be as trusting as that. That is one of the issues that has been highlighted most recently by the police there.

Mrs Overend: I recently held a farm crime watch and safety awareness day in my constituency office. Do the burglary figures include the theft of trailers and suchlike from farms? Will the Minister outline the strategies that are in place to reduce the number not only in the Foyle constituency but across Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I am not sure how many questions there were. In answer to the first one, burglary is theft from within premises. Unless Mrs Overend has constituents who store their tractors inside a dwelling house, they would not be covered by such figures. A very significant campaign is going on that involves police and PCSPs in different parts of Northern Ireland that shows a significant and welcome year-on-year reduction. The issue is about ensuring that local figures, through the operation of the PCSPs, are seen to be driven down by addressing the local needs that members of PCSPs see in conjunction with the police and the other relevant agencies.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships

3. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on progress on implementing the policing and community safety partnerships, including whether a review will take place to ensure that they are working effectively. (AQO 3517/11-15)

Mr Ford: Policing and community safety partnerships are taking forward initiatives that aim to make a real difference on the ground and empower local people to shape local solutions to policing and community safety issues. The Assembly recently approved an order designating a range of statutory bodies as members of all PCSPs. That order has now come into operation. The contribution that those organisations can make to enhancing community safety has now been formally recognised, and I look forward to seeing the further benefits that the partnerships can achieve through the strengthening of existing joint working.

The partnerships are planning for the future, taking forward the development of two-year partnership plans that will address issues identified through targeted consultation with local communities. The PCSP joint committee, which is my Department and the Policing Board working together, will continue to monitor their effectiveness on an ongoing basis, assessing partnership plans and tracking achievement against those on a quarterly basis to ensure that they address locally identified concerns.

The joint committee will, as part of that ongoing process, scope out a range of issues for review. The work of the joint committee will be complemented by a planned review of the general effectiveness of PCSPs by the Criminal Justice Inspection. The joint committee will also consider the outcomes and take any necessary action to ensure that the partnerships continue to deliver effectively for their communities.

Mr Moutray: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he outline the role of his Department to intervene should a PCSP not be functioning effectively, particularly when some members of one political party seek to impede progress?

Mr Ford: I suspect that Mr Moutray is hinting at a particular issue. If he wishes to raise that issue in correspondence with me, I will happily respond. The key issue is the role of the joint committee of the board and the Department to

assess the work that is being done against the partnership plans and to ensure that those plans are in place and that action is being taken. That is the best way to address the issues raised and to ensure that the PCSPs are operating effectively. It is, of course, early days, but I want to ensure that we maximise the opportunities from bringing together district policing partnerships (DPPs) and community safety partnerships (CSPs).

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Will the Minister comment on the issue of voting rights on PCSPs and whether it is appropriate for designated agencies, such as the PSNI and the Housing Executive, to have a vote, taking into account that they are accountable for delivery on the partnerships?

Mr Ford: Mr Sheehan raises an interesting point, and how exactly that will operate is being considered by my officials and the Policing Board. In the meantime, I am sure that most Members will be aware that the statutory bodies are not exercising their rights in the first year of operation. That is one of the matters that will be considered as we review the working of the partnerships.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I must be very careful not to get my Ps and S's mixed up in my question. Since the establishment of the PCS

Some Members: PCSPs

Mr McCarthy: No. The PCSPs. Will the Minister remind us of the intended benefits of those organisations over the previous and separate DP and CSPs, if he can understand all those PS's, PQs and what have you?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Minister will do his best to understand.

Mr Ford: I am sure that my colleague meant to say DPPs and CSPs. If it is any consolation, people in the Department have also been known to trip over those letters.

As a local representative, I am not unique in having identified problems previously when very similar groups of people attended two different meetings a month in each district, one for the former community safety partnership and one for the former district policing partnership. Certainly, the accountability issue that was relevant to the police and administered through

the DPPs remains, I believe, relevant so that the other agencies live up to their responsibilities in promoting community safety. That is why I welcome the fact that we were able to get the agreement of the House on the first Justice Bill that established the PCSPs, and the Act is now in operation. That ensures a much more holistic and joined-up way of working. It also ensures that the full range of organisations responsible for matters relating to community safety will now work together.

There have been some very good examples of work being done in PCSPs. However, it is important that all the relevant agencies play their part in every partnership.

Prison Review: Update Reports

Mr D Bradley: Ceist uimhir a ceathair, a LeasCheann Comhairle.

4. **Mr D Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice when he intends to publish the update reports by the oversight team on the implementation of the prison review. (AQO 3518/11-15)

Mr Ford: Further —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, will the Member translate?

Mr Ford: The Minister can translate "question 4", Deputy Speaker.

Further to my response to a question asked in the House —

2.45 pm

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

Mr Deputy Speaker: We do not take points of order during Question Time. To keep everyone calm, will the Member please translate?

Mr D Bradley: Sure, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Minister was correct. Question 4.

Mr Ford: Further to my response to a question asked in the House on 5 February, I am pleased to confirm that the four reports from the prison review oversight group have been provided to the Justice Committee, and a copy of each has been placed in the Assembly Library. The oversight group is also preparing its first annual report. That will be presented to the Justice Committee in May and will also be deposited in the Library. In recognition of the

level of external interest in the reform programme, the four reports to date have also been published on the Northern Ireland Prison Service's website. Plans are also being developed to publish a stakeholder report in June that will outline progress to date and the next steps that will be taken to reform our prisons.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ceist uimhir a ceithre a fhreagairt. Ba mhaith liom fiafraí de: cad é atá á dhéanamh aige le luas na n-athruithe a mhéadú?. I thank the Minister for answering question 4. What is the Minister doing to increase the speed of reform?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Bradley for the question, although I suspect that it could have been asked on a number of occasions. Undoubtedly, aspects of the reform programme did not proceed as quickly as we might have hoped — for example, the necessary means to appoint the members of the change management team took rather longer than we had hoped— but there has been a significant speeding up of the reform programme in recent months.

We have now reached the point that four of the recommendations from the review team have been signed off by the oversight group, and a fifth recommendation will go to the oversight group for approval this month. In addition to those five points specifically covered, considerable progress has been made on staffing matters. As the House will know, I will report on the outcome of the estates review later this month, and work is ongoing to transform Hydebank Wood into a secure college. Those are all indications of a significant speeding up of the work. Although getting work off the ground may have been a little bit slower than we had hoped, progress is now extremely good.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagraí go dtí seo. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his answers up to now. Cuirim fáilte roimh an fhoireann seo agus a cuid oibre. I welcome the oversight team and its work. Will the Minister agree that the absence of an implementation plan undermines any process of accountability and any clear definition of what change is required?

Mr Ford: I am afraid that I cannot agree with Ms McCorley. I believe that we have a very firm, clear programme in the efficiency and

effectiveness programme, which is underpinning the review team's work. Within that, there are a number of different work strands that spell out in great detail the work that is to be done. The fact that the oversight team is looking in detail at how each of those targets is met on a quarterly basis is an indication that we have a firm commitment to carry through on that reform process.

Mr Gardiner: Does the Minister accept that although accepting change is necessary, there are significant changes in losing too many prison staff within a short timescale?

Mr Ford: Mr Gardiner certainly has a point about that. That is why there has been a slight difficulty with some prison staff who would have hoped to leave earlier than has been possible. Staff are not being released without it being acceptable on operational grounds that they are able to be released. I am, however, glad to confirm that we have now received an approval from the Department of Finance that will allow all those who applied under the exit scheme to leave. There was a grant of funding that will enable a number — some 80 — to leave by the end of this month, and others will then leave as operational circumstances permit and new recruits come in. So, yes, there is an issue about the loss of experienced staff, but there is also an issue of their being replaced by well-qualified, enthusiastic, well-trained new staff. I believe that the Prison Service will be better for it and that those who served in difficult times will be able to get the early retirement that they deserve.

Hate Crime

5. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the development of the action plan to address the recommendations arising out of the Challenge Hate Crime project. (AQO 3519/11-15)

Mr Ford: My Department, in conjunction with NIACRO, will shortly publish a number of documents detailing the findings of the Challenge Hate Crime project and research. Following the publication of those reports, I will convene a meeting of all stakeholders to consider how best to take forward the recommendations. At the Challenge Hate Crime conference in September 2012, I announced that an action plan would be developed in response to the range of issues raised by the Institute for Conflict Research's report on hate crime and the justice system. Similar issues have been highlighted in the January 2013 report by the Northern Ireland

Council on Ethnic Minorities on race and the criminal justice system. I also note that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission is conducting an investigation into how justice agencies manage race hate crime. In particular, a major problem that was highlighted for the Prison Service during the project was the identification of offenders who were convicted of offences aggravated by hostility under the terms of the Criminal Justice (No. 2) (Northern Ireland) Order 2004. Work is ongoing to introduce changes to facilitate better monitoring of the legislation and to identify offenders more effectively. Those changes are due to be introduced in the coming months, and they will be reviewed to ensure that the legislation is used effectively.

Mr Eastwood: I thank the Minister for his answer and for that update on some of the progress that he outlined. Given that many members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community find themselves victims of hate crime, can the Minister tell me whether he is doing any work with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to ensure that the long-overdue sexual orientation strategy is finally published?

Mr Ford: I certainly share the sentiment of Mr Eastwood's question, although I am afraid that the sexual orientation strategy is entirely a matter for OFMDFM. I am certainly concerned to ensure that, when we look at hate crime, we look at all aspects of it and not just at the more usual aspects of sectarianism and racism. The Department is committed to ensuring that we cover all aspects of hate crime as we look to the future.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for your answers so far. Does the Minister agree that, too often, tackling hate crime is undermined because we have no legislative definition of sectarianism in relation to hate crime?

Mr Ford: Ms McGahan raises an interesting issue about the difficulty of ensuring that we get the necessary acceptance of aggravation of hate crime. I am not sure, however, that the definition of sectarianism, as opposed to the proving of sectarianism, racism, homophobia or whatever, has been the difficult issue that has to be crossed. I certainly regret the fact that we were unable to reach that agreement when we discussed the issue in connection with sport while the Justice Bill was being debated in the Assembly's previous mandate.

Maghaberry Prison: Separated Prisoners

6. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice, given that Roe House is now full, where he intends to hold prisoners who have signed the separation compact in Maghaberry. (AQO 3520/11-15)

Mr Ford: Applications from prisoners to be admitted to separated accommodation are considered by the Prison Service on behalf of the Secretary of State. I have no role to play in the consideration of such applications, and I am, therefore, neither consulted on nor informed about the grounds for approving or refusing individual applications.

Affiliated republican prisoners who apply for and meet the criteria for separation are held on two designated landings in Roe House. The Prison Service has to manage accommodation pressures daily and, therefore, needs to retain a degree of flexibility in where it houses the various categories of prisoners in its custody. There are currently accommodation pressures across Maghaberry prison, so every effort is made to maximise the transfer of prisoners to Magilligan prison. I am aware that a small number of potentially separated republican prisoners are currently held in normal accommodation at Maghaberry. However, I am satisfied that the Prison Service keeps prisoner accommodation arrangements under review.

Mrs D Kelly: The Minister mentioned Magilligan prison in his answer. What progress is there on a new prison? Since prisoners' families should not also suffer a sentence, does he have some level of empathy with the concern of such families about where prisoners are housed and the impact of that on travel time?

Mr Ford: I am well aware, as is the Prison Service, of the remoteness of Magilligan. Nonetheless, in the current circumstances and given the accommodation pressures, a number of prisoners have to be accommodated at Magilligan whose families do not necessarily live close to it. However, I do not imagine that the House would wish me to entirely pre-empt the statement that I will make on the prison estate in a couple of weeks' time, when we will be able to look at the issue in a bit more detail.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Does the Minister agree that the prison review team's recommendation to categorise Maghaberry into four mini-prisons

provides the best way forward for dealing with any accommodation issues related to Roe House?

Mr Ford: Mrs Kelly would be annoyed were I to answer that supplementary after declining to answer hers, other than to say that we will know in a couple of weeks' time when I discuss the prison estate strategy in the House.

Mr Givan: The Minister knows that there are more than 1,000 prisoners in Maghaberry, which is already struggling with capacity issues, and that hundreds of prisoners are already doubled up in cells. However, the demand on the republican side is to try to take the other landings in Roe House. Will he assure this place that he will resist those attempts by prisoners who continue to demand special status for the things that they have done, when they should be regarded in the same way as every other prisoner, and that is as a criminal.

Mr Ford: I refer Mr Givan to my initial comments: it is not for me either to resist or to support demands for separated accommodation. He may wish to raise those issues with the Secretary of State. I will ensure that the accommodation pressures are managed as best they can be in the interests of all prisoners, and that includes the wide variety of categories of prisoners currently accommodated in Maghaberry.

Prisons: Body Scanners

7. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the outcome of the three-month testing of the new search technology at Magilligan prison and Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre. (AQO 3521/11-15)

Mr Ford: It is important to state that the objective of the process of technological evaluation was to establish whether a viable solution was available that would serve to reduce the level of intrusion inherent in our existing procedures. From the start, I was clear that any solution must, as a minimum, perform at least as well as our current processes and that the security and safety of all in our prisons was and remains paramount. Following an evaluation of the millimetre wave scanners at Magilligan and Hydebank Wood, the Prison Service found that there were limitations to the technology in the operational environment. There was a reliance on the compliance of the prisoner to be scanned, and current full-searching processes provided a higher level of security and, therefore, greater assurance.

It is important to remember that millimetre wave body scanners use technology that is primarily designed for the aviation industry. That use is different from that in our prisons. Such technology is not in use in any prison in the United Kingdom. I remain very grateful to the manufacturers for their help and support throughout the pilot. Although I share the Prison Service's disappointment at the outcome of the pilot, I am heartened by its determination to continue to seek a modern, viable alternative to our existing practice of full-body searching. To that end, I have just received the Prison Service's justification application seeking permission to pilot the use of transmission X-ray technology. After consideration, I shall, as required by the legislation, register it with the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Finally, it is important to state that the requirement for full searching on entry to and exit from the prison and in some other circumstances must remain until a satisfactory alternative can be found.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he indicate whether there are any benefits for the Prison Service from the trials of those scanners, and will he outline what the likely costs were?

Mr Ford: The benefits were the benefits achieved by following through on the prison review team's report recommendation that we should seek an alternative to full body searching. That showed that the Prison Service was committed to following through on that, and I was fully supportive of those trials being carried through. However, as I highlighted, it showed that the technology developed for different circumstances was less than ideal in the Prison Service. Therefore, we are seeking to look at other methods of the kind that we have already suggested will be more appropriate for Maghaberry, although they might not have been needed for Magilligan or Hydebank Wood.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answers. Will he ensure that whatever technological piece of equipment is brought to assist searches, as recommended in Anne Owers's report, it is not seen as a stand-alone measure but will complement other aspects of searching?

Mr Ford: Indeed, Mr McCartney makes a valid point. It is not simply a matter of a machine; it is a matter of the full aspects of ensuring

security and safety of prisoners and prison staff. That is something that we will bear in mind as we continue to look at other options.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister state whether there were any objections to the use of that new technology from prisoners or their visitors?

Mr Ford: I can tell Mr Robinson that it only affected prisoners, not visitors. There were some objections, probably on the basis that people had to receive a full body search anyway and it was a matter of covering the two options at the same time. Some people, therefore, objected to it, but the key issue was that, unfortunately, the technology did not prove to have the same benefits as a full body search.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that questions 8, 9, 10 and 11 have been withdrawn and require written answers.

Community Safety College

12. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the new Community Safety College at Desertcreat, including whether it is on target financially. (AQO 3526/11-15)

Mr Ford: The procurement process for the Community Safety College is still ongoing, and it is, therefore, inappropriate to comment at this time.

Mr Craig: I listened with interest to what the Minister had to say. *[Laughter.]* Can the Minister actually comment on any aspect of that project and whether the rumours that have been in the press about a 35% cost overrun are true?

Mr Ford: However inventive Mr Craig may be, as Minister I will comment on facts as and when appropriate, not on rumours.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Dr Alasdair McDonnell is not in his place to ask question 13. Mr Conall McDevitt is not in his place to ask question 14.

Criminal Justice: Payment by Results

15. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the potential for introducing payment by results schemes in the criminal justice sector. (AQO 3529/11-15)

Mr Ford: We continue to monitor developments in England and Wales, but it is much too early to make a meaningful assessment of the

effectiveness of payment by result schemes in the criminal justice context. In addition, Northern Ireland is a much smaller potential market, so it is not clear yet whether such schemes would be feasible. I understand that that view is shared by the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Irish Minister for Justice and Equality. We already achieve good outcomes in Northern Ireland as a result of our existing arrangements; for example, through the Probation Service working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector. Consequently, I am not considering the early introduction of payment by result schemes in Northern Ireland.

Environment

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Planning Bill: Rural Communities

1. **Lord Morrow** asked the Minister of the Environment how his proposed Planning Bill will assist rural communities. (AQO 3530/11-15)

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment): I thank Lord Morrow for his question. The reason why the Planning Act was passed was to reconfigure and reshape the planning system.

What I am doing through the Planning Bill is accelerating the proposals and the law passed in the previous mandate to ensure that, as soon as possible and in advance of the rundown to RPA, planning is more fit for purpose. Whether it is for an urban community, a rural community or any other community in the North of Ireland, requirements for consultees to respond within a certain time frame, statutory pre-application discussion around significant applications and fixed penalty notices by way of enforcement will serve the interests of the urban and rural dweller.

3.00 pm

Lord Morrow: I thank the Minister for his reply, but does he not agree that our countryside has been denuded to some degree by stringent rural planning objections? Does the Minister not accept that this was an ideal opportunity to make way for greater planning facilities in our rural countryside? I feel, and I hope that he agrees, that his Bill does not come up to expectations in that regard.

Mr Attwood: As I said, the purpose of my Bill is to bring into the life of planning in advance of RPA that which would otherwise come into life only at the time of or following RPA. I have no ambition greater than that, important though that ambition is.

In any case, I believe that what is now happening around planning policy statement 21 (PPS 21), which guides rural development, is reshaping our rural dispersed community in a helpful and sustainable way and one that is consistent with good planning and good environmental requirements. Let me give you an example: 83% of applications for rural dwellings, whether replacement or new dwellings, are now being approved. That demonstrates, especially now that there is new training in place, peer review and, indeed, appropriate ministerial review of planning applications where there may be some dispute. It demonstrates proper flexibility for rural dwellers when it comes to applications, which is consistent with good planning policy.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Minister, clearly PPS 21 does not facilitate non-farming rural dwellers. Will you outline what you will bring forward in the new Planning Bill to facilitate those non-farming rural dwellers?

Mr Attwood: As I indicated to Lord Morrow, that is not the purpose of the Bill. The purpose of the Bill is to accelerate reform of the planning system in advance of RPA. Otherwise, that would have been put off until 2015. How do we accommodate rural dwellers? That is done through the proper application of PPS 21. Members have told me in previous times how they thought that there is inconsistency in planning decisions between divisional planning offices when it came to PPS 21. We are saying that the policies that guide replacement and new dwellings in the rural countryside were not being applied in a proper and prudent manner. That is the advice that I was given, and it is why I conducted, and continue to conduct, an operational review of PPS 21.

Perhaps MLAs have just gone quiet, but I do not now get a lorry load of correspondence in respect of individual PPS 21 applications in which Members bring to my attention concerns about the difference between application in one area and another. I do not get that any more. The reason is that we conducted training in the autumn of 2011. There is peer review by senior management of cases where there is some contention. Heretofore, cases have been referred to me. The consequence of that is

that, in the round, the application of the policy now fulfils the spirit and substance of the policy and is accommodating of the rural dweller when it comes to approval decisions.

Mrs D Kelly: Now that the Minister has outlined what the Bill is not about, perhaps he will give us an indication of some of the benefits of the Planning Bill.

Mr Attwood: As I indicated, there will be a requirement on developers to undertake pre-application discussions in respect of significant developments. Why will that be significant? With the Windsor Park application, because of the piloting of pre-application discussions, when the planning application was eventually lodged by the football authorities, it was processed in 11 weeks. That demonstrates, in pilot form, the benefit of pre-application discussions. That will become a statutory requirement on the far side of the Planning Bill, whereby any developer will have to give 12 weeks' notice as to their planning intentions and will have to submit a report along with the planning application on how they conducted local community consultation. That, allied with proposals for enforcement, consultation, timelines and statutory consultees, the list for which will be much broader than the current list, and other interventions will make the planning system more fit for purpose and will see it turn more corners. It has turned many corners over the past 18 months.

Planning: Renewable Energy

2. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the average length of time before a decision is issued on renewable energy planning applications. (AQO 3531/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. It is an important question because, as I keep saying, renewables are arguably Ireland's biggest economic opportunity. That includes Northern Ireland because of the quality of our wind, wave and tidal energy and the quality of the manufacturing, R&D and services that we can provide to take forward renewables applications.

On average, it takes 37 weeks to process a renewables application, which is too long. However, when you look at the scale of renewables applications that have gone to the point of decision, especially in the past 18 months, compared with any time heretofore, that tells a much bigger and better story. In the two quarters up until September 2012, 326

renewables applications were approved, building on the 401 renewables applications approved in 2011-12 and far in excess of the numbers in previous years. The scale of renewables application approvals and decisions demonstrates how the planning system is increasingly shaping itself to live up to the ambition of renewables being our single biggest economic opportunity.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answer and note his commitment to renewables being the future. I am sure that he is aware of the 40% target for renewable electricity that the Executive have set. Is he aware that there are experts who believe that the first 20% will come at a cost of £80 million and that the second 20% will more likely cost in the region of £800 million? Is he content that consumers should foot the bill?

Mr Attwood: That is an important question because although we are on track to achieve our 40% renewable target by 2020, if all the wind developments that have been approved were built and the energy went to the national grid, that alone would account for 30% of electricity needs in the North. So we are on the right path.

The Member makes two valid points. First, if you have approvals but have not got connection, or if you have approvals but the cost of connection is disproportionate, there will be a risk to the renewable target of 40% being achieved by 2020. To a large degree, that is outwith my authority because it is an issue between the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the industry and the regulator. I note and welcome the progress in that regard recently.

Secondly, we are in a situation in the North in which, to borrow a phrase, we could reach a perfect storm. The Utility Regulator spoke about that at a recent conference in Belfast. There could be a perfect storm in that we might not have sufficient interconnection on the island of Ireland to keep the lights on in Northern Ireland. That is only one of the factors that could lead to a perfect storm. The issues of energy security, energy cost and, as the Member said, the cost of connection of renewables are ones on which we need to more collectively gather our thoughts.

Mr Spratt: Currently, wind turbine applicants appear to think that there is a considerable delay with the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), which is one of the consultees. Given that the agency is within the remit of the

Minister and his Department, will he ensure that the process for many of these outstanding applications is speeded up?

Mr Attwood: If the Member and other Members were to speak to people in the renewable energy industry, they would tell you how the process now compares with any time heretofore, not least because of the scale of renewables applications in the system, which cover nine categories. The applications are not only for wind turbines and wind farms but anaerobic digesters, solar plants, and so on. There is a historical backlog, and there has been a surge of applications, especially for wind turbines, of which there are over 700 in the planning system at present. The fact that so many are now coming to the point of decision, especially in the past four quarters, demonstrates that the planning system is increasingly able to manage that scale of application. It is getting decisions out on renewable energy and to enable farm diversification because many applications come from farmers.

I note what the Member says, and there have been a number of conversations, to put it mildly, in the Department between those in planning, the NIEA and me. Those in the planning offices and strategic planning know that they are the executive authority and that they make the decisions. It is for them to take into account all material considerations and to accept or not accept the advice that they are given by the NIEA as one of those with whom they consult. They know that, and I have stressed that point. On the other hand, you cannot run a coach and horses through advice from the NIEA, especially on the habitats directives from Europe, where we have a height responsibility. I will not allow that to happen. At the same time, I will encourage the planning system, as the executive authority, to make the right decision based on the right grounds, whatever the other advice might be.

Ms Lo: Will the Minister consider encouraging renewable companies to include community benefits in their funding applications?

Mr Attwood: That is a very important and timely question. We have asked a third-party organisation to run a summit on community benefits because, in the round, whether the applications are for renewables, wind farms or other categories, the potential for community benefits is not sufficiently embedded in our planning system for us to see, within the granting of consent, benefits to the community from renewables or significant other

applications. We have something to learn in that regard, especially from Scotland, but with the important caveat that there cannot be a sense that attaching a potential community benefit to a significant planning or renewables application is, in some way, a means of getting preferable treatment in the planning system. No applicant must think that. That is not what I am talking about. I am talking about mainstreaming into the planning system benefits, to the community and the individual, of applications open to that sort of potential.

Chauffeur-driven Vehicles

3. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment what provision will be made for chauffeur-driven limousine type vehicles within the regulations arising from the Taxis Act (NI) 2008. (AQO 3532/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for his question. I recently conducted a consultation on this matter because of the issue that the Member identifies. The consultation ended in January, and its conclusions will be brought to me shortly and then referred to the Committee. I conducted the consultation because, as was the point behind the question, those who provide chauffeur-type services might be treated differently under the Taxis Act regulation. I agree with the point. Consequently, and subject to full assessment of the consultation and to the Committee's views, it is my intention that, in 2014, when relevant regulations are tabled, those who provide chauffeur services and, indeed, other services, will not be subject to the full licensing regime that will be applicable to other forms of private hire. Therefore, those who offer booking in advance and who have a contract for a stated amount to provide chauffeur services will not, for example, have to display a roof sign.

3.15 pm

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive answer. Given that there has been a response from 75% of drivers on the regulations on taxis, does he see any particular need to address in the regulations that he is introducing that issue of full compliance?

Mr Attwood: No, I do not. The Member is quite right, and he is very up to date. The reason is that, to date, under the taxi-licensing regime that came into place in the autumn of last year, 76% of drivers have been captured, in that they have applied for a temporary licence or have received a full licence. Given the new regime

and its requirements, if not its demands, a 76% compliance rate this early into a new regime is quite significant and quite high. We believe that, through other mechanisms, including audit of the licensed offices on a rolling basis and other mechanisms of encouragement and advice, more and more of those who are not within the system will be captured by it, particularly when licence holders go to get their PSV licence in April this year. That will not be in a way that will penalise people or cut down their commercial opportunities but in a way that will create a more open market with more certainty and better standards for people who use taxis.

Mrs McKeivitt: Will the Minister outline any other significant concessions or exemptions in the reform of taxi regulations in the North?

Mr Attwood: There are already some exemptions for wedding and courtesy transport, and that will be no different going forward. As Mr McLaughlin's question indicates, that will be broadened. In any case, this is the Assembly's will through the Taxis Act, and we are now working through, in regulation, the implementation of that Taxis Act. I have done that in a way that, as best as possible, and without pleasing all the taxi drivers, has tried to protect the interests of all taxi drivers, especially the small. Although the regulations came into effect in September of last year, that is why there was a two-month window in which there was some flexibility in the new regime.

Even though the system is in place, by and large, a light touch enforcement policy is being adopted this time. However, that may escalate in the near future. We tried to reduce the amount of upfront costs, especially those for the small or individual operator. In those ways and in our management of the rolling-out of the further taxi legislation between now and the end of 2014, we will do that in a way that does not rush our fences but tries to reduce costs and that, at all times, brings about a situation where illegality is driven out of the business and standards and performance improve even beyond the significant improvements of recent times.

Mr Cree: Does the Minister agree to continue to receive representation from public hire taxi firms on the legislation?

Mr Attwood: As the Member may have indicated, I certainly do. Even last week, I sat down with representatives of the public hire taxi business. We had to adjourn that meeting because we ran out of time, so it is to be

reconvened before Easter. Even those individuals, and those whom they represent, said that they did not dispute the fact that the legislation, in the round, is a good thing and that there needs to be more regulation and a changed regime when it comes to taxis generally in future. For them, it was all about the implementation and whether, in that implementation, public hire taxis were being squeezed to their disadvantage and to the advantage of private hire taxis. That is not the purpose of the legislation, as I indicated in previous answers. If weighty points are made by the public hire businesses, I will listen to them and, where I can, try to accommodate them. As long as they are weighty points.

Review of Public Administration: Transition Committees

5. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he will take the fact that Lisburn represents 70% and Castlereagh 30% of the population into consideration when approving the make-up of the statutory transition committee for Lisburn/Castlereagh. (AQO 3534/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I am sorry to disappoint the Member, but, as I indicated to Mr McLaughlin, this is an occasion on which I will have to say no. I do appreciate that, across the clusters, different amalgamations are happening and that, for Lisburn and Castlereagh, there is a disproportion between the population sizes. Some would argue that that should be reflected in the membership of the statutory transition committee (STC). In my view, subject to what I am going to say, it is better to continue with the model of having equal representation. That has worked satisfactorily to date. To revisit the numerical balance on an STC compared with that on a voluntary transition committee (VTC) is not the way to go. If I did it for Lisburn and Castlereagh, there are clearly arguments around numbers and other criteria that mean that I would have to do it elsewhere. Although I have variations in the total numbers of STCs and VTCs for local reasons, I do not believe that there is a fundamental reason to revisit the overall numerical balance.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. I ask my supplementary question knowing full well that I have a member of Castlereagh Borough Council right beside me. Does the Minister not recognise that the make-up of the new council area of Lisburn, which is much larger, with 27 wards, and Castlereagh, with only 13, is different from the other 10 new

council groupings and that the membership of the VTC should reflect that?

Mr Attwood: I just do not understand why anybody who is an MLA is still sitting on any council anywhere in the North. I have made every effort to try to ensure that that practice ends. In the fullness of time, it will end, as a clause in the —

Mr McCarthy: It is a long commitment.

Mr Attwood: I do not know about other people, but I think that MLAs have more than enough commitment in this place. I am looking around the room, including not too far away from me. You could draw conclusions from some of that.

Although I understand the point that there is a differential, others could make the same and different arguments. Go up, for example, to the cluster on the north coast, where four different councils are coming together. Your colleague is nodding in some agreement with me. You could argue that you need to fine-tune that to reflect the scale of population in each area. In my view, it is not a matter of whether it is the right balance or, according to the Member, otherwise. The issue is whether the councils that are coming together in clusters — whether that be two councils or four councils, or whatever the configuration — are going to have the leap of imagination and practice to realise that, on the far side of 2015, they will be a unitary council that will have to behave as a unitary council, rather than trying to seek to protect their own historical council interests. That is the key. In that regard, a number of council clusters have yet to reach that point of imagination, never mind the practice of operation, when it comes to merger.

Mr Lunn: Given the fact that the DUP controls both those councils, and given the ambitious spending plans that Castlereagh has at the moment, does the Minister agree that perhaps the Lisburn DUP does not trust the Castlereagh DUP?

Mr Attwood: I would like to make it very clear that I do not think that that is the motivation behind the Member's question.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Seo í mo cheist ar an Aire. What is the Minister's latest thinking on how the issue of rates disparity can be tackled as the councils begin to merge into their new clusters?

Mr Attwood: As the Member is aware, the Executive decided three weeks ago that there would be a package of up to £30 million for rate convergence in order to reduce the burden, following reorganisation, on those councils where there is a significant differential when it comes to rates. That is led by DFP with support from DOE. When you collapse it down, we are looking at three models: support for individual ratepayers, support for council clusters, or differential rates for a period after RPA while convergence happens. The Executive, the Finance Minister and I have not settled on the final model, but at least the financial backing is there for it.

Review of Public Administration: Transition Committees

6. **Mr McCartney** asked the Minister of the Environment whether d'Hondt will be used for appointing political members to statutory transition committees. (AQO 3535/11-15)

Mr Attwood: I thank Mr McCartney for his question. It will be the case, with the formation of the new councils, that, built into the law in the re-organisation Bill that I hope will come to the Assembly very soon, there will be a statutory requirement to have a model of proportionality when it comes to positions within and outside a council cluster. The model will be d'Hondt, Sainte-Laguë or single transferable vote (STV), with the default being d'Hondt, in order to ensure that, although you would like people to aspire to and have the ambition for power-sharing across the life of the council and external bodies, you need to have the certainty of legislation. Given that, heretofore, it was left to the voluntary transition committees to reflect the party membership, my understanding is that d'Hondt has prevailed in that regard. I do not intend to legislate by way of regulation to have d'Hondt or another mechanism as a requirement under the regulations when the statutory transition committees are formed.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his answer and his affirmation of proportionality. Will he give us an update on the consultation that has taken place with the councils on the formation of these new bodies?

Mr Attwood: There was a previous consultation in 2009 in that regard. It was my judgement to not have a fresh consultation but to conduct stakeholder events, and they have now concluded. On the basis of the conclusions of those stakeholder events, the

regulations will come to the House in April. There was no formal consultation on the formation of the STCs — in my view, legally and operationally, that was not a requirement — but there was stakeholder engagement in order to ensure that there was understanding and ownership of the proposals that have been taken forward, not least because the powers of the STC will be very important. As I have said in many places and I repeat now, the STCs will also have the power of appointment. In my view, the sooner the senior management of the new council cluster is confirmed by power of appointment granted to it by the STCs, the better all the clusters will be.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time.

Mr McDevitt: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand that question 14 was reached during the questions to the Minister of Justice, and I was not in my place to ask that question. I apologise to you and colleagues in the House. It was entirely my own fault, and I am very sorry for not having been here to ask the question.

Private Members' Business

Draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; supports the commitment to bring to an end the practice of dual mandates; welcomes the recognition within the Bill that political donations in Northern Ireland require sensitivity; acknowledges that further work is needed on measures that are still under consideration for potential inclusion in the Bill, including the creation of a formal Opposition in the Assembly, the size of the Assembly and the length of the Assembly term; and calls on all political parties which support inclusive and consensual politics to play a full role at Westminster or to forfeit the expenses that they claim from Parliament. — [Mr Nesbitt.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out from "welcomes" to "sensitivity" and substitute

"believes that the declaration and publication of donations to political parties in Northern Ireland should be handled in the same manner as donations to political parties in Great Britain". — [Mr Dickson.]

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt in éadan an rúin agus an leasaithe. I will speak against the motion and the amendment. The motion deals, in the main, with the Miscellaneous Provisions Bill, which the British Secretary of State said she was going to table in Westminster.

In all of those issues, we will be guided — as we have always been guided — by the core principles around equality, mutual respect and parity of esteem. We outlined that in our submission last week to the Select Committee, and we also outlined that, obviously as an Irish republican party, we are for the maximum transfer of powers, and we will seek to be in a position to legislate for those things ourselves in the future.

3.30 pm

I want to touch on a number of issues. Caitríona Ruane and Conall McDevitt made the point about the main bulk of the motion. Even the Select Committee realised, and last week it made it very clear, that large swathes of the Bill proposed by Owen Paterson will not now feature in the Bill as it goes forward, and quite rightly. We stated publicly at the time that Owen Paterson was, in a sense, encroaching on the work of the Assembly.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee has a very clear remit. All the main parties in the Assembly are represented on the Committee. When issues that relate to the Assembly are discussed, the Chair has always made sure that some of the smaller parties outside the Committee that are not represented are given a status where they can come as observers or table questions to witnesses, and that is the way that it should be. Part of the motion tries to undermine the work of the Assembly. Perhaps there is the sense that the Ulster Unionists are real players when it comes to Westminster. I accept that they have no MPs, but that is another day's work. On that basis, we oppose the proposal.

I come to the part of the motion where we are asked to note the publication of the draft miscellaneous provisions Bill, but at the end of the motion we are told that, if you are a party that supports inclusive and consensual politics, you have to take your seat at Westminster. That is a very upside-down version of democracy. Stewart Dickson, surprisingly, indulged himself in that a little bit. If you talk about a shared future and respecting people's views, you should respect the views of the electorate. We will see on Thursday of this week. Sinn Féin will, very clearly, state its view of abstentionism —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCartney: Yes.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate Mr McCartney's comments but, at the same time, if your party were to succeed in the election this week, a substantial minority of people in that constituency will have felt that their view will have been lost and that they will not have appropriate representation. What I am asking and suggesting to you is this: you have a duty of care to those who do not vote for you or those who actively vote against you, and that duty of care includes taking your seat in a democratic process, even though your party many not feel that that is the appropriate place for you to be.

Mr McCartney: You make that point. Your person will stand on that platform on Thursday, but bear this in mind: we have five Westminster MPs who offer a constituency service. I say on record that there are not too many people who have either come to us publicly, come to our constituency office or wrote to our MPs to say that we are not representing them and shown instances of where they have not been represented. People find different ways to represent their constituents, but when you have stated very clearly that you are not taking your seat, that is what you should do.

Even the defence that you used about the Welfare Reform Bill, when you said that people should be over there putting up a very good fight for it —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Member to make his remarks through the Chair.

Mr McCartney: Sorry, Deputy Speaker. Through you, I remind Members that, collectively, the Westminster MPs who left here to defend us against the Welfare Reform Bill did not do a very good job of it. As a matter of fact, I have heard that some of them said this in their defence, "If only we were stronger. We are in a big House with 650 people, and we are overwhelmed". The Assembly is the place where that type of business should be conducted.

With regard to political donations, we were sympathetic with the shift in your amendment; I say that through the Chair. However, we think that the limit of £1,500 should be lowered. It should be £500. No one should fear finding out who gives a political donation. The public have a right to know, so that there is no sense of what went on in the past and, perhaps, still goes on, where people who give large political donations curry favour and can be rewarded. We have seen how that debacle has played out in Westminster and in other jurisdictions throughout Europe.

I note that the motion proposes that the Assembly support the commitment to bring to an end the practice of dual mandates. The best way to support anybody's commitment to do anything is to do what you feel is the tone or the input —

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

Mr McCartney: OK. Thank you.

Mrs D Kelly: I cannot help but be somewhat bemused by some of the contributions thus far. Mr McDevitt dealt adequately with the mixed messages that emanated from the Ulster Unionist Party. However, from a nationalist perspective, and from the position of being in a party that has always stood for equality and against violence, woe betide Sinn Féin to lecture others about equality given the recent judgements found against some of its most senior members.

Transparency is also an issue, given many Sinn Féin members stated dual membership of an organisation that extorted hundreds of thousands of pounds from the community that we all represent in the House. Nonetheless, the debate around the reform of the House should rightly be the business of the House. It demands the broadest support from the community in the North of Ireland, given that the institutions were roundly and overwhelmingly supported by the people of Ireland, North and South.

Our party made an extensive submission on the Bill, and, as you will know, Mr Deputy Speaker, members of Westminster's Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee were over here to take evidence from the political parties on the Bill. Indeed, as Mr McDevitt pointed out, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee is also considering the role of the House, particularly the issue of an opposition.

Our party has made an extensive response as to how the institutions here can be improved and reformed at some point in the future. At all times, the reforms that we could and would support demand protection for all minorities and are based on the premise of equality, protection and safeguards so that we do not go back to the types of majority rule that people in Northern Ireland experienced in the past.

I am happy for our party's submission at Westminster to be the critique of that Bill. I firmly support the party's submission, and I ask those who support the motion to read the SDLP's response to the proposed legislation if they have not already done so.

Mrs Overend: I am pleased to speak to the motion, which has been tabled in my name and in the names of my Ulster Unionist colleagues. The draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is vital legislation, especially for the future operation of the Assembly.

I was fortunate enough to spend some time on the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, which considered a number of

these issues in detail, and I am aware of the debate and, sometimes, differences of opinion between parties. However, the motion is important in allowing us to bring those issues to the Floor.

I believe that the Bill as it stands is not ambitious enough. However, two measures are to be particularly welcomed. First, the commitment to end dual mandates is a positive development. Before my time in the House, Dawn Purvis attempted to legislate to end that through a private Member's Bill that was voted down. In that respect, it is better late than never. Some parties have been slower than others to end the practice of dual mandates. However, I believe that all are committed to that in the short to medium term, and we need to ensure that those commitments are carried through.

The issue of having consistency on this point across Scotland and Wales was raised. Uniformity across the UK is needed on people being a Member of any devolved Administration and a Member of Parliament at Westminster at the same time. I am also of the opinion that a TD should not be able to be a Member of the House of Commons. Perhaps an amendment will be made to ensure that this anomaly will be closed off.

The Bill recognises that the issue of political donations to parties in Northern Ireland needs to be looked at sensitively. This party, more than most, has had to deal with the effects of a terrorist campaign. We are, therefore, fully aware of the heavy price that some have paid for their political support.

Although time has moved on and we have relative peace, the fact is that the dissident threat remains severe. The very recent murder of a prison officer from my constituency was a terrible reminder of the capabilities of some of these groups. Therefore, I fully support the continued anonymity of political donors in Northern Ireland and reject the amendment from the Alliance Party. However, in doing so, I recognise that moving towards full transparency is necessary, but that cannot be at the expense of individual security.

The Member for South Down Ms Ruane waxes lyrical about transparency on expenses, yet denies the people of Northern Ireland transparency on the past deeds of high-profile members of her party in the terrorist campaign.

The concluding part of our motion deals with the Sinn Féin practice of claiming expenses while not taking their seats at Westminster.

This important issue should be included in the measures still under consideration for potential inclusion in the draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. It has been the long-standing policy of the Ulster Unionist Party to be against that position, and I will outline the reasons for that.

First, and most importantly, the people in the constituencies where Sinn Féin MPs are elected have no voice at Westminster on critical issues such as defence and financial services. I know that only too well from my constituency of Mid Ulster.

Secondly, if MPs do not take up their seat at Westminster and participate fully in proceedings there, why should their party be entitled to the expenses that Sinn Féin draws down? The Members on the Benches opposite spoke of how successful Sinn Féin is at representing their constituencies at Westminster. When I ask my neighbours from Mid Ulster whether they feel represented in that place, the answer is a resounding no.

My constituents may be rightly sceptical about Sinn Féin's decision to step down its double-jobbing representative in Mid Ulster, if only to boost its party's expenses intake. We are not talking about insignificant amounts but hundreds of thousands of pounds at taxpayers' expense for second homes in London, staff costs, administration and expenditure allowances. My colleague and party leader, Mike Nesbitt, referred to Sinn Féin claims of almost £700,000 last year.

The debate is also a timely reminder of the flawed position of Sinn Féin in the lead-up to the Mid Ulster by-election, where I hope that the people of my constituency will, in Nigel Lutton, elect an MP who will actually represent them —

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

Mrs Overend: — as opposed to simply claiming the expenses.

I reiterate the importance of the Bill and urge all parties to support the motion.

Mr A Maginness: Mr Nesbitt, in his opening address, said that the Good Friday Agreement was a transitional agreement and that we therefore had to look at the current situation within that context. I reject that absolutely. The Good Friday Agreement is not a transitional agreement. It is an agreement that was endorsed by the majority of people in Northern

Ireland and the Republic. There was, therefore, a concurrent majority North and South, and the people who voted for that agreement were voting, very clearly, for a partnership arrangement within Northern Ireland, a partnership arrangement between North and South, and a partnership arrangement between Ireland and Britain.

3.45 pm

Mrs Overend: Will the Member give way?

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Agnew: There are two us.

Mr A Maginness: I will give way to Mrs Overend.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Member for giving way. You talk about the Ulster Unionists speaking about this as a transition. Surely, it has been a line from the opposite Benches that the Belfast Agreement is a transition to a united Ireland. Therefore, our line is surely equally viable.

Mr A Maginness: First of all, that is not the position that the SDLP has ever represented. We have said that we establish a partnership within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Britain and Ireland as a whole. Through that, we create a situation where we can achieve the conditions in which reconciliation takes place within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Ireland and Britain. We have seen that, Mr Deputy Speaker, in that we have seen the reconciliation take place between Ireland and Britain. We have seen the Queen's visit, we have seen the manifestations of reconciliation, and we have seen a more equal relationship develop between Ireland and Britain. Indeed, that should serve as a model of achieving that within Northern Ireland and between North and South.

If we start unpicking the agreement, as Mr Nesbitt suggested — *[Interruption.]* He may shake his head, but, in fact, that is what he is going to do. If he pursues the line that it is a transitional agreement, he in fact he starts picking away at it.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: I will give way, certainly, because I want to hear the point.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for giving way. It is a transitional set of arrangements. The next step to solidifying it and to moving towards normal politics is the introduction of opposition. Was it not Mr Durkan, when referring to the agreement, who talked about it being a process rather than a product?

Mr A Maginness: The agreement is a process — of course it is a process. It is a process of building partnership. That is why we should be building partnership within the Chamber, why we should be building partnership within the Executive and why we should be building partnership in the community. That is the way in which we will change the nature of our politics here and bring about reconciliation. That is the aim of the Good Friday Agreement, and that should be the aim of all of us. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I remind Members that the correct way to make your remarks is through the Chair.

Mr A Maginness: It should be the aim of all of us, Mr Deputy Speaker, to try to achieve that reconciliation. Out of that reconciliation, we will look at a new society and a new politics, which will be creative and which will transform relationships not only in Northern Ireland but between North and South. It will also increase further the relationship changes between Britain and Ireland. That is the nature of the agreement. If you go messing about with the agreement, as you suggested, in terms that it is simply a —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As I reminded Members, you make your remarks through the Chair, not in the second person.

Mr A Maginness: Certainly, Mr Deputy Speaker. Of course, I am addressing the whole House, and I am addressing your good self in particular, and, as your good self would understand, I use a few rhetorical flourishes to emphasise the point.

I think that it is necessary to remind people, first, of the mandate of the agreement from all the people of Ireland, and, secondly, that the agreement has a specific purpose, which is to achieve reconciliation. We must, therefore, deepen partnership to achieve that reconciliation. I do not see that reflected in the motion that the Ulster Unionists tabled today, nor do I see it in the leadership that the leader

of the Ulster Unionists, Mr Nesbitt, has given his party. He had never mentioned the agreement, until today. It is something that may or may not have happened.

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

Mr A Maginness: However, he should emphasise the very emphasis and centrality of the agreement —

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

Mr A Maginness: — if he wishes to give progressive leadership.

Mr Allister: Mr Deputy Speaker, you can relax now after that rule-bending speech by the Member from the SDLP. You know that I would not dare to do anything at all that approaches bending the rules of the House.

The draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is most notable for what it does not contain. Last week, I spoke to a politics class in one of our post-primary schools. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I do not know quite what the pupils had done to deserve it. However, there you are. I asked them to name two or three key things that denote a working democracy. It was no surprise to me that they said the right to free and fair elections; the right to change your Government; and the right to have an opposition. However, in respect of two of those — the right to change your Government, and, thereby, to vote a party out of Government, and the right to have an opposition — we have constructed, in the House, the very antithesis of that, causing me, in another place, to describe this House as a blot on the democratic landscape, and so it is. It functions by denying the very right of an opposition to exist and by telling Northern Ireland's voters, "Oh yes, you can vote, but you can never change your Government" and, "Oh yes, you can tinker with the pecking order in government, but you cannot vote a party out of government if it retains a handful of MLAs." That is not democracy: that is built on the very antithesis of democracy. It is little wonder that there is such a growing disconnect between the House and people, as has been demonstrated in so many ways, including by the falling turnout at elections.

Of course, when they were spinning and selling the St Andrews Agreement, some people told us — the some being those on the nearly empty DUP Benches — that by 2015, there was bound to be a review; that we would have to put

up with it for only eight years, after which there would be voluntary coalition and an opposition; and that it was a small price to ask for a short time. Everyone knows, as I knew and said then, that it was a con. If the Secretary of State thinks that the House will self-regulate into a functioning democratic institution, she is even more deluded than I thought. The House will never address the issues that most in the House live off. There is not one politician in the Executive who is prepared to jettison the guarantee that, as of right, his or her party is for ever in government. Therefore, the House will never self-regulate.

Last year, there was a simple illustration of that in the Committee on Procedures. I made a most modest proposal in that Committee that the growing ranks of the unattached in the House — *[Laughter.]* — should have the rights that exist in other parliamentary institutions for a group — a technical group — of non-attached members so that, perish the thought, they could have representation on the Business Committee. We might just arrive at a situation in which we challenge the fact that only Executive parties are represented on the Business Committee and get to the point at which someone who is not in an Executive party just might get called and have the right to table an Adjournment topic or have a motion taken — something that never happens in the House. Who voted down that most basic, fundamental, starting-point proposition of a technical group? It was the cabal of the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Mr McDevitt: I thank Mr Allister for giving way. Perhaps the Members on those Benches would consider a same-sex union of some form. That would be a way of being able to get it together.

I will ask Mr Allister a serious question. If the TUV were ever large enough to be entitled to a seat at the Executive under d'Hondt, will he give a commitment, here and now, that he would never take that seat?

Mr Allister: Absolutely. It would give me the greatest possible pleasure — *[Laughter.]* — to repudiate that corrupt system for the formation of a Government, where you do not have to agree anything to be in government, and it is, therefore, no surprise that when you are in government, you cannot and do not need to agree anything. It is a perverse system from start to finish.

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Unfortunately, I am running out of time.

We should have a Government formed by people — whoever they might be — who can agree what to do about the economy, health and education, provided that they can command the requisite majority, and those who cannot do that, whoever they might be, should form the opposition, but that threatens far too much of the vested interest in the House. That is why the House will never self-regulate itself into a working democratic institution and why it will cling to the hideous manifestations that demonstrate that it is a House not interested in people, —

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

Mr Allister: — in democracy or in affording the fundamental rights that even schoolchildren can recognise: the right to vote a party out of Government and the right to have an opposition.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Mr Steven Agnew. Mr Agnew, I have to tell you that there is a mere two minutes left.

Mr Agnew: OK. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will make the points quickly and simply.

In opening this debate, Mr Nesbitt said that we have an opportunity to move towards normalised Northern Ireland politics, but I fear that this is going to be an opportunity missed.

If we go into another region-wide election without transparency about political donations, it will be a disgrace, especially given that the next region-wide elections will elect our new councils, which are to have planning powers. We are going to have, as Mr Weir put it in a recent article in the 'County Down Spectator', councillors who will be judge, jury and executioner in making planning decisions, and yet they could still be, to the best that we know, funded by the very developers who put in those planning applications. To have such a system would be corrupt and undemocratic, but we have the opportunity to put that right, and we must do so.

I have heard the various arguments that, for security reasons, we cannot go towards full transparency, and I do not buy them for a second. We have taken soldiers off the streets and taken down the watchtowers. In fact, we have called on people to join the police, when it

is the police who are under attack at present, not political parties. We still say that it is safe to join the police but it is not safe to tell people who gives money to political parties.

It is very clear that the parties in the House — the DUP, the UUP and the SDLP — that have called for continued secrecy about political donations do so in their self-interest and the interest of their donors but not the interest of democracy. There is not a requirement to give money to political parties. Indeed, if political parties had a bit less money, we might have freer and fairer elections, as Jim Allister said. You cannot make an informed choice if you are not made fully aware of who you are voting in. Until people know who is funding their parties, they will not know who decisions are being made in honour of.

As Mr Dickson rightly pointed out, although Sinn Féin called for transparency —

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

Mr Agnew: — it needs to step up and do it. Since 2010, the Green Party has —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry; the Member's time is up.

Mr Agnew: — published its donations, and I encourage others to do the same.

Mr Lunn: I cannot help commenting that Mr Allister is not the first politician in the House to shout, "Never, never, never", and we know what happened there.

Mr Allister: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Lunn: I think Dr Paisley also meant it at the time.

Obviously, I support the amendment, but I am not going to spend too much time on it, because Mr Dickson has outlined our position, and it does not look as though we are going to get unqualified support around the House.

I will say once again that it has been 15 years since the Good Friday Agreement, and we really do not feel that it is necessary any more to protect people in this way. We are only talking about donations of over £7,500. We feel that the electorate has the right to know who is funding political parties, in particular corporate donors, which nobody mentioned; it is not always individuals.

We will move on from there. We managed to end the practice of double-jobbing almost immediately after the situation arose. In Westminster, I think that there are about 630 MPs, and, I think, only four — one, two, three, four — still double-job, and that indicates to me that 626 of them do not feel that it is possible.

No Member of the Welsh Assembly or the Scottish Parliament does it. It should be phased out sooner rather than later.

4.00 pm

We absolutely do not disagree with the principle of opposition. In fact, I am sure that every Member remembers the Alliance Party's paper that was issued in 2004. [*Laughter.*] I am sure that they will all remember it when I mention the title: it was called 'Agenda for Democracy' —

Mr Kennedy: Oh, that one?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr Kennedy: We shredded that years ago.

Mr Lunn: Well, it was a thoughtful paper on the question of a formal opposition while incorporating power sharing and requiring qualified majority voting. We proposed that nine years ago.

The motion is quite wide-ranging. It calls for only one action, but there are a lot of suggestions in it. One is to do with the size of the Assembly. Our most recent two manifestos indicated that we would be perfectly comfortable with an Assembly of about 80 Members. That figure was based on 16 constituencies rather than 18, and five Members per constituency.

If we are talking about reform of the Assembly and all the various items that are mentioned in the motion, we might have a better chance of achieving some of them in a five-year time span rather than a three-year one. I heard Mr Agnew's suggestion, but as much as the electorate seems to be cynical about what goes on up here, I am not sure whether it would really want us to bring an election forward. We will leave that hanging.

The call for action in the motion is for:

"all political parties which support inclusive and consensual politics to play a full role at Westminster or to forfeit the expenses".

Mr Nesbitt gave us the figures in his opening remarks. Over £500,000 in expenses goes to Sinn Féin, and there is access to another £100,000 in short money. We are very familiar with Sinn Féin's stance; it has been going on for 100 years, and the party is totally implacable and dogmatic about it. I heard Pat Sheehan say that its MPs do the same job as everybody else. I contrast that with MLAs being elected here and not coming to the House. They would be more like councillors than MLAs. Westminster is a legislative assembly; perhaps far more so than this Assembly. If you are not there to involve yourself in legislation, Committees, scrutiny and all the other activities of the oldest Parliament in the world —

Mr B McCrea: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr B McCrea: I take the point that the Member is making, but does he not think that it would be better if we heard from all the Members who turn up to this place? We really ought to extend debating time so that time is made to hear the views of all the people who are democratically elected here and have a mandate.

Mr Lunn: The Member has taken the opportunity to make his point. It was not really related to what I was talking about.

I wonder when Sinn Féin will finally accept that times have changed. There may come a time when it does not need to stick to that particular dogmatic stance and its MPs could do the job that they are elected to do. I remind Sinn Féin that the Queen has visited Dublin. Martin McGuinness has shaken hands with the Queen. Sinn Féin has voted to fly the Union flag at Belfast City Hall. Times are changing.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: Yes.

Mr Sheehan: When Sinn Féin stands for Westminster elections, it does so on the basis of abstentionism. When people vote for Sinn Féin candidates and elect them, that is what is known as democracy.

Mr Lunn: I know that that is Sinn Féin's current policy. I am just making the suggestion that, some time in the not-too-distant future, perhaps it may think about —

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

Mr Lunn: — reconsidering that policy. I support the amendment. In the absence of support for that amendment, we will support the main motion.

Mr Elliott: It has been an interesting debate, and it is quite interesting that we are debating Westminster legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly. We were supposed to be debating the Criminal Justice Bill tomorrow, which is meant to go through the Northern Ireland Assembly, but we cannot do that. It has been removed from the schedule because the Alliance Party Minister cannot get agreement between Sinn Féin and the SDLP on the amendments that he withdrew two weeks ago. Our debating of Westminster legislation is quite an unusual scenario.

I listened to Mr Allister, and maybe I will deal with his point first. Perhaps more people were interested that Mr Allister had addressed a post-primary education group at the Assembly, but I was more interested in his comments that followed. Mr Allister made it clear that he would not take a place at the Executive table, even if he were offered one. Mr Lunn then said that we have heard other people say, "never, never, never" in the House before. I assume that he was referring to another party, but he could also have been referring to his party. I recall the time that the Alliance Party was the bastion of opposition in the House. Members of that party said that they were the opposition. What happened? It was offered a place at the Executive table, and it refused it. No, sorry, they did not; they took it. My apologies to Mr Lunn; you took that place.

Mr Lunn: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: You do not have to clarify, but I will give way to you.

Mr Lunn: Just to clarify, we never said, "never, never, never". *[Interruption.]* In the situation we were in at that time, we did our best to provide an example of how an opposition could work in this place. *[Laughter.]* We never said that we would not accept office if we qualified, were offered it, and the Assembly voted us into that position.

Mr Elliott: It heartens me greatly to hear that clarification from Mr Lunn that the Alliance Party grabbed the chance to take a place at the Executive table when it could and forgot about being the opposition. It just left the opposition behind. That is very interesting.

Mr Allister, I am only saying that you should beware in case you get smitten with the same bug.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: I am happy to give way.

Mr Allister: I assure the honourable Member that some of us are made of sterner stuff than the Alliance Party. Members from that party boast about transparency. Yes, they are transparent: you can see right through them. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Elliott: That is all quite interesting.

I also listened to the points from Members of the SDLP. What Mr McDevitt, Mrs Kelly and Mr Maginness said about the Ulster Unionist Party was quite interesting. They said that we should be building partnerships. Of course we should be building partnerships. Mind you, the only people I see the SDLP building partnerships with are Sinn Féin Members. They have you on a little hanger, and when they say, "jump", you ask, "how high?"

Yes, Mr Maginness, we have often had opportunities to build relationships with your party, but those were rejected at every stage. When we needed your support to continue devolution, you let us down every time.

Mr McDevitt: Will the Member give way?

Mr Elliott: Go ahead, Mr McDevitt.

Mr McDevitt: On this idea of partnership and hangers, it is curious that the SDLP is, in fact, engaged in an electoral contest against Sinn Féin in Mid Ulster. The last time I checked, Patsy McGlone will do rather well on Thursday. It is a pity that we cannot say the same about the Ulster Unionist Party. I wonder who really is under the cosh this week, Mr Elliott.

Mr Elliott: Mr McDevitt, you really do —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Before Mr Elliott concludes, I believe that we are now well off the subject of the motion. Perhaps we could take a leaf out of that school's book, which, I am sure, stuck rigidly to the motion.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much for that guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I should not have taken those interventions, but, as you well know, I am a kindly person and like to give people the opportunity to have their say.

We are well aware of Mr McDevitt and his party signing petitions of concern to support Sinn Féin. It stopped the National Crime Agency operating here and helped to name a play park after a convicted terrorist in the Newry and Mourne District Council area. If we are going to build real partnerships, those are the type of issues that we need to get away from. I am quite happy to listen to that if it is really genuine.

Coming back to the representatives of Sinn Féin, I have to say that they never cease to amaze me. They never cease to surprise me with their attitudes. Openness and transparency? Maybe they could tell us where the £26 million from the Northern Bank robbery has gone, or where some of the bodies that their comrades-in-arms in the IRA buried and which have disappeared are. Maybe they could tell us about some of the actions that they carried out since 1970.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is not for me to tell the Chair what his responsibility is, but I think that you have to make a ruling on some of the comments made about Sinn Féin.

Mr Deputy Speaker: In fact, I can tell the Member that I was discussing the matter with the Clerks, and, of course, it is not your place to tell the Chair. [*Laughter.*] I remind the Member, please — this is the second time — that he has an important task, which is to sum up the debate and stick rigidly to it.

Mr McCartney: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that it is my duty sometimes to remind those in the Chair of their responsibilities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I do not think that I should let that go. You did not need to remind the Chair, because I was discussing the matter with my Clerks. It is a serious offence to challenge the Chair.

Mr McCartney: I am not challenging the Chair.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Following on from that interchange between you and my colleague, I want to say that he raised a point of order on the basis that there was no intervention from the Deputy Speaker after a number of scurrilous remarks were made by another Member against our party. So, as far as I am concerned, I stand by my colleague's need to make an intervention on

our behalf. Whether that is an advising or reminding intervention is a moot point, but I ask the LeasCheann Comhairle to reflect on the fact that it took a Member from this side of the House, on behalf of our party, to make an intervention before the matter was dealt with, and I think that that is regrettable and not really acceptable.

Mr Deputy Speaker: It is important for the Member to accept and understand that I was in the process of doing that. I was about to remind Mr Elliott that he should not make remarks about a political party in connection with bank robberies and other things for which it is not accountable.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for that guidance, and I would not question your authority. I was merely replying to the debate and to Members who had spoken in it. Openness and transparency were clearly one of the issues; openness and transparency about —

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think that you should make a ruling on accuracy. The transparency being discussed today concerns donations to political parties, and the Member is straying off that point.

Mr Allister: How much of the £26 million did you get?

Mr Sheehan: I beg your pardon?

Mr Allister: How much of the £26 million did you get?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please.

Mr Sheehan: That is three times today.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. My function here is to try to encourage Members to stick to the motion. I have endeavoured to do that, but I have not had the complete support of every Member, and that is to be regretted. I repeat that, at every stage, I have tried honestly to ensure that no political party should have any complaint. I am not happy with some of the remarks that were made, and I am most certainly not happy with the last remark that was made from a sedentary position. I trust that we can now, in a democratic way, complete the debate on the motion and go to the vote without any more disharmony.

Mr Maskey: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am prepared to take one more point of order, and then I must proceed.

Mr Maskey: I appreciate that you referred to the last remark made by a Member from a sedentary position, but will the LeasCheann Comhairle advise the House that he will consider those remarks? They were totally unacceptable, and it is not good enough that they will simply be noted by the House. In fact, I think that action needs to be taken.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I most certainly intend to take up the issue with the Speaker after the debate because I am not happy. Sorry — Mr Elliott, continue.

Mr Elliott: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was in the process of saying that I was responding to the openness and transparency aspects of the debate. Clearly, as indicated here in the debate, a number of people have paid the ultimate price for their actions and their involvement in political activities.

4.15 pm

That is one of the obvious concerns that we have about allowing total openness in the donations aspect of the Bill. Some people face intimidation. It is still happening. Some organisations and groups take intimidatory actions against some of those who are involved in not only political parties but wider cultural activities. That is very unfortunate. If we could get away from that, I would fully support total openness and transparency, and I know that the Ulster Unionist Party would also support it. Unfortunately, we are not at that stage, simply because we still have a terrorist threat in Northern Ireland, which is very unfortunate and concerning. One of the issues that we highlighted when speaking to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee was the danger that the openness that it is looking for could bring about. If we can get to that stage, so be it and so much the better.

We clearly have to recognise that a number of those who lost their life in Northern Ireland because of their political involvement came from all sides of the community. It would be unfortunate if we let this pass without expressing and acknowledging that quite clearly. Mr Dickson was quite clear in what he said about that, and I accept where he is

coming from. However, we obviously have a difference of opinion on that point.

We in the Ulster Unionist Party were criticised by other parties for bringing forward the motion. Why? Why should we not have this debate openly? Mr McDevitt argued that this was for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee, but it is also for the House to debate. We need to bring these things out into the open in this Chamber. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee has not brought forward any proposals on a number of these issues, so why should we not debate those aspects in the Chamber?

Mr Deputy Speaker, I apologise that the debate ended up in the fractious way that it did. However, you cannot accept that we and I will sit back and take some of the aggression that comes from other parties and that we will not have our say when making a winding-up speech. So, I make no apology for putting forward those aspects that I and the Ulster Unionist Party believe in. I hope that voters in Mid Ulster this week send back a representative in Nigel Lutton who will actually represent the people there. Thank you.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 12; Noes 69.

AYES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Lunn and Mr McCarthy

NOES

Mr Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Byrne, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dunne, Mr Durkan, Mr Easton, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lynch, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr McGimpsey, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt,

Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mrs Overend and Mr Spratt

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 32.

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Elliott and Mr Nesbitt

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr D Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Hazzard, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McCartney, Ms McCorley, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr A Maginness, Mr Maskey, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McCartney and Mr Sheehan

Main Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the publication of the draft Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; supports the commitment to bring to an end the practice of dual mandates; welcomes the recognition within the Bill that political donations in Northern Ireland require

sensitivity; acknowledges that further work is needed on measures that are still under consideration for potential inclusion in the Bill, including the creation of a formal Opposition in the Assembly, the size of the Assembly and the length of the Assembly term; and calls on all political parties which support inclusive and consensual politics to play a full role at Westminster or to forfeit the expenses that they claim from Parliament.

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

Meat Products

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 in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Irwin: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes Northern Ireland's excellent reputation for producing high-quality food; expresses concern at the ongoing incidents surrounding meat products; encourages retailers to source more food products from Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with retailers to ensure that processors and farmers get a better return for their products.

At the very outset, I declare an interest as a farmer and a primary producer.

4.45 pm

Northern Ireland's reputation as a premium producer of high-quality food products is a status that has been hard fought for. That reputation is a result of the farming community being wholly committed to the long-term survival and growth of the industry. The level of effort that is required for modern-day farming is not to be taken lightly. The farmer expends considerable resources to produce the food that we all enjoy every day, yet the reward that he receives is totally inadequate. Farmers must cope with an ever-changing marketplace, which, by all accounts, they have little control over. The red tape and regulations that are associated with farming require hours of paperwork and constant checking to ensure that everything is compliant. That is time lost without reimbursement. The farmer is not paid for that time, nor can he take it in lieu; it is part of the farmer's daily routine.

Input costs for running a farm, such as fuel and energy, continue to rise. Those costs are unable to be passed on to compensate the farmer. The farmer must somehow continue to swallow up those significant increases. That simply is not sustainable in the long term. Farmers across the Province have, no doubt, been heartened considerably by the spell of dry weather that we have experienced in recent days. I am of the firm belief that there will, of

course, always be a seed time and harvest, although it has certainly been extremely challenging over the past 12 months. The weather is out of the farmer's control, and some might say that that is just as well. The extremely wet weather in recent months has had a massive effect on farming operations, such as planting, harvesting and getting animals to grass. There is a lack of feed for wintering, and there have been problems with slurry spreading prior to the closed period. Again, that has meant farmers having to spend more simply to stand still. In many other industries, a company is able to factor in such costs and, over a period of time, recoup such expenses. However, in the agrifood sector, the primary producer is limited in his or her ability to claw back those outgoings. Farmers are already making huge efficiencies in their operations to ensure that every move that is made is one that uses the least amount of resources while still allowing the farm to function as a business. However, that is with regard only to things that are within their control. As I said, farmers have no control over outside pressures.

The horse meat scandal has proven, without any doubt, the true value of our local agrifood industry. Our local butchers are certainly testimony to that in recent weeks, with many reporting a significant uptake in many products. Consumers are clearly very happy with our home-grown produce. The agrifood sector's strict traceability requirements have given the consumer a level of confidence that has been missing for some of the imported products that are bought in the larger supermarkets. Consumers have been setting the pace by visiting their local butcher in greater numbers or by choosing products from the meat counters in many of our supermarkets. Many consumers have rejected the cheaper, processed products that have been at the source of the recent investigations. Given that our traceability is among the most comprehensive in Europe, I am fully supportive of the call for retailers to source more meat products from our home industry.

It must be realised that there would not be a local agrifood sector were it not for the farmer as the primary producer. It is only fair and proper that, as the first and most vital link in the supply chain, the farmer is more fairly treated and receives a fair price for his produce. In contributions to the House last week, I stated the importance of our industry continuing to develop to add value to our local produce, including dairy and horticultural products. That remains a very important part of the growth strategy for the agrifood sector in Northern

Ireland. I know that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has been active in helping to promote our fantastic local produce to a world market. Those efforts are not going unnoticed, so I urge her to continue in that important work. However, the farmer must be fairly paid in a way that reflects the efforts that are invested in bringing our local food to the table. Farm incomes fell alarmingly in 2012, by around 50%, owing to a wide range of factors, some of which I have covered already. That has taken a heavy toll on farmers, no doubt.

The supply chain must react to that hardship and move to a realistic pricing system that would see changes in how the bigger retailers source and price their lines. The Agri-Food Strategy Board must invest time and effort in confronting that make-or-break obstacle for our primary producers, and I urge the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to use her influence and offices to help to achieve the price security that our farmers deserve.

We have heard much of the quality of our local meat in the press in recent weeks. Now it is time to see farmers receive a fair return on the investment, time, money and effort involved in reaching that high level of quality. Our industry depends on it.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I commend the proposer of this timely motion for bringing it to the House. I also commend our local agriculture industry and primary producers, of which there are many in my constituency and in many other rural constituencies. The primary producers in our local agriculture sector are a good source of employment in local communities and are often the only source of income in many family homes, so their importance to our wider local economy cannot be overstated.

The recent questions over the quality of meat could have been disastrous for the entire agrifood sector, but it is my view that we have overcome the worst of that. We are now back on the path and can clearly state that all meat coming out of here is safe for people to consume. That is the important message that we all need to state. I know that the Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, along with many other people, has been keen to state that on every possible occasion. I join him in giving those reassurances. Even though our primary producers clearly have not been involved in this, they have unfortunately been affected by it and suffer greatly from its outworkings, so we need to see what can be done to assist those

primary producers who may have been impacted on by the negative connotations that may be there, particularly towards red meat. We need to reassure people that meat is safe.

For a change, I went out for dinner last night with my wife and enjoyed a good steak. I am sure that there are many in our community who are not as well fed as I am, but I would like to tell people that that is a very rare occurrence — I usually eat chicken.

Our agriculture producers need greater support. They need support from government, and the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development have created the Agri-Food Strategy Board to see how best they can provide that support at an Executive level. Agriculture producers need support from Europe, and there are continuing negotiations on CAP reform and how it can best help our primary producers. However, they also need support from our local retailers and customers. Support local meat and local butchers, and ensure that whatever meat you are buying is sourced locally. In that way, you can be guaranteed of its quality and traceability.

In his opening contribution, William Irwin fully outlined many of the other challenges that face farmers, and I will not rehash any of his well-made points. He did a good job, so I will not bore people by doing that.

Finally, I welcome the Minister back from her recent trade mission, and I congratulate her and all those organisations that were away with her showcasing our projects. I wish all those companies who went with her, hoping for business, all the best.

Mr Byrne: I support the motion and congratulate those who tabled it. I had hoped to table an amendment, but there were logistical reasons as to why that did not happen.

The agrifood sector is very important to Northern Ireland, as it is now a £4 billion industry and has the potential to grow further. It continues to grow despite the recession. As you know, it sustains over 92,000 jobs, both directly and indirectly, and accounts for 20% of manufacturing. For those reasons, we cannot allow it to slide owing to uncertainty about the authenticity of any of our Northern Ireland food products. For it to continue to grow, we need to sustain its good reputation and ensure that consumers and purchasers have confidence in the industry. Reputation and confidence are paramount. For that to happen, we have to be

more proactive than reactive, as the recent food crisis has demonstrated.

The recent samples that have shown various levels of horse DNA in processed meat products in these islands have caused grave concern among consumers. The question we must ask is this: how can we prevent this from happening in future?

We need a quality assured scheme that will do as it suggests: assure quality so that consumers get the level of quality and goodness that they are entitled to in the products that they buy in the supermarket. We have an excellent farm quality assurance scheme that relates to food products leaving the farm in Northern Ireland, but there are obvious gaps in the food traceability system from farm gate to supermarket shelf. We do not have national or EU-wide robust systems of food safety standards and quality assurance.

A number of agencies are involved in the food industry, but a disjointed traceability and verification system in the food chain pertains. We have environmental health officers in local councils in relation to all food premises and food hygiene, which comes under the auspices of the Department of the Environment (DOE); we have the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) veterinary inspection service that relates mainly to farms, marts, slaughtering houses and cutting premises, and that is obviously in DARD; we have meat processing plants with on-site meat inspectors, which come under the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI); and we have the Food Standards Agency (FSA), which comes under the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and relates to food safety, food authenticity and labelling. Obviously, we have a very disjointed system.

The FSA says that it is committed to open and transparent working, and it has briefed the media regularly to reassure the public about food products on sale. It is important that consumers are assured by the public authorities and are given full information to make informed and confident decisions on the food that they buy.

We are all aware that DARD figures for 2011-12 show that farm incomes have dropped from £290 million to around £143 million, which is a drop of over 50%. Farmers are faced with increasing costs. Feed prices have risen, we have had poor weather, and we have had increases in fertiliser and fuel prices. Even the value of the single farm payment has fallen due

to currency fluctuations between the euro and sterling. Quite simply, farmers need better prices at the farm gate. Currently, they are not recovering the cost of production. However, those higher production costs are not reflected in the price that the farmers receive. Food processors and retailers are caught in the dilemma that consumers want to buy food cheaply but, as the recent crisis has shown us, not at any cost. They want to be assured that the food that they and their families eat is of a certain quality and standard. The big retailers demand lower prices from the processing industry, and they exercise a lot of the purchasing power.

We need to get back to buying as much as possible locally. Many local butchers are enjoying more trade and turnover since the recent crisis. Food processors and retailers need to source as much as possible locally, so that consumers know that they are getting the best quality possible. That would ensure that the farmers and the processors get a better return, as well as giving consumers a good deal.

Some of the imported meat products have given rise to major concerns —

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

Mr Byrne: — about quality and accurate or inaccurate labelling. EU-wide traceability is needed now more than ever. I thank the Minister for being present. Hopefully, we will hear some positive news.

Mrs Overend: I state my support for the motion at the outset. It is certainly timely, given the events surrounding the local meat producers and the challenges that they continue to face.

I am on record as clearly outlining my support for our local farmers and processors. I said in the House last week:

"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." [Official Report, Vol 82, No 5, p62, col 2].

I repeat that sentiment today.

The motion rightly refers to the excellent reputation that Northern Ireland has for producing high-quality food, and there are many examples of that. I think specifically of Glenarm

Beef, whose organic beef has already won several prestigious awards and is served in several leading Belfast restaurants and hotels. I think locally of the mid-Ulster area and McKee's Butchers and Ditty's Home Bakery, which has won several prestigious awards. In my constituency of Mid Ulster we also have the Karro Food Group, which is best known for its Cookstown sizzle. It is Northern Ireland's most popular pork products brand and is a major supporter of our agriculture industry. The success of Moy Park is also well documented as Northern Ireland's largest food processing business, and it remains one of our top companies employing more than 5,000 people here.

5.00 pm

Those are just some examples of what Northern Irish producers have to offer. None of it would be possible without the fantastic reputation that has been built up over the years. We must not let the ongoing situation regarding horse meat negatively affect those who are producing our local meat products because all evidence thus far suggests that they are complying with the relevant safety and quality regulations and bringing first-class local produce into the food chain. However, we cannot overlook the fact that incidents surrounding meat products are still ongoing. For example, my colleague Jo-Anne Dobson, following questions to the Agriculture Minister, was able to find out that horse meat had been found in burgers supplied to the Greenmount and Loughry campuses of the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE).

We have also been informed in recent weeks that burgers containing horse meat had been supplied to hospitals and schools in Northern Ireland. Massive chains such as Lidl, Tesco, Asda and Aldi all experienced incidents of potential contamination as well. Investigations must continue by the Food Standards Agency and, especially, by the retailers, who have displayed an alarming lack of vigilance in some cases in order to uncover the full extent of horse meat in food processed in Northern Ireland. Only then can we begin to restore and regain the confidence of consumers in the long term.

Perhaps the Minister will update the House today on the actions that she is taking in her responsibilities regarding the economy to ensure that the matter is being fully investigated. How is the Minister reassuring the many overseas importers of meat from our

producers that our products remain at the high standards that we have all come to expect?

The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment can act to ensure that our processors and farmers are getting as good a return as possible on their products, as the motion suggests. For example, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has confirmed that a groceries code adjudicator will, hopefully, be up and running by mid-2013. That new role must have the necessary powers, and its independence must not be in question. If enacted properly, it has the potential to benefit some 311,000 farms, and it must ensure that supermarkets treat all their suppliers fairly and within the law.

I ask the Minister for an update on the establishment of the adjudicator and what discussions she has had with the relevant officials at Westminster on that. I have mentioned the reputation of our produce, and the Minister can work to protect and grow that reputation.

To conclude, the main way for people to ensure that they are buying quality meat is to buy local. Therefore, it is fundamentally important that all of us, including the Minister, continue to encourage people to do that as much as possible.

Mr Lunn: I support the motion. It asks for two things: it encourages retailers to source more food products in Northern Ireland; and it calls on the Minister to try to ensure that our processors and farmers get a better return. I do not know how many times I have heard major supermarkets telling us how much produce they source locally; I am sure that they say it in every area where they set up a big store. The first thing that they tell us is that they will source as much of their produce locally as they possibly can. They give us all kinds of figures, but I wonder what percentage of their input actually comes from local producers.

Joe Byrne said that our farmers are being priced out. Even when they cannot cover their costs, they are still being underpriced by other producers around the world in the mad dash for the cheapest possible food. Pardon the pun, but, in the past few weeks, the chickens have come home to roost.

The supply chains for Tesco and others, which have been exposed as selling deficient goods, have been proven to be not adequately covered or checked, and the labelling is not right. Frankly, I would hope that the first thing that all supermarkets would do is acknowledge that

there has been a problem in a particular supply chain, and close it down. If they have been importing goods from Romania or wherever and a percentage of horse meat or horse DNA was found in them, they should not buy any more from that supplier. It is as simple as that.

That would lead towards buying more local produce. It would certainly lead them to buying produce from countries that have an excellent record of traceability. I am not a farmer, but I am constantly assured that nowhere in the world is the traceability regime better than ours, so they should, obviously, be buying local, but that leads to the question of how much they are prepared to pay. It also leads to the question of how much the public is prepared to pay for such produce off the shelves.

There have been food scares over the years when public demand for a product dropped. At the moment, demand for processed meals such as lasagne and moussaka has gone through the floor, but I would guess that, in a year's time, demand will be back up because people like those things. Frankly, they are cheap and cheerful and perhaps people have to buy them in the present economic circumstances.

The next part of the motion calls on the Minister:

"to work with retailers to ensure that ... farmers get a better return".

I hope that the Minister can find some way to put pressure on the people who matter in that industry to do exactly that. At the end of the day, it is a free and very competitive market. I hope that market forces and competitive pressures do not gradually bring about this situation again. I hope that a situation in which we find horse meat in what is supposed to be a beef product will never recur. As somebody who kept a horse for a few years for my daughter, the very thought of that turns my stomach. I read an article in 'The Sunday Times' yesterday that stated that, if you went to Verona, I believe, you have a choice of about six horse meat dishes in an expensive restaurant. That just indicates how things can be completely different in other parts of the world.

It is not all to do with meat these days. I have a thing about the way that salmon is produced and farmed. I think it is downright disgusting. I watched a programme the other night about prawn production in Thailand — I do not know whether anybody here saw it — that is part of a campaign by Hugh what's-his-name about fish production and waste around the world. If you

let them, such programmes would put you off food for life, and I am not sure what you would eat.

I will go back to the main point. Northern Ireland producers have the capacity to produce the best meat that there is. It is within the power of the local Tesco, Sainsbury's, Aldi or Marks and Spencer to try to buy that at a price —

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

Mr Lunn: — that gives them the opportunity to make a profit and also gives farmers the opportunity to make a turn on their hard work. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say on the issue.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. Northern Ireland is renowned for producing high-quality farm produce, and we can rightly be proud of the continued success of our agrifood sector. That is one of our growth industries, and it is right and proper that we continue to protect and enhance it.

Some of our local products have gained world renown, especially those with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) status under European Union law, such as Comber spuds and Lough Neagh eels. We must continually look to build on that.

The sector has great potential, as was demonstrated in the 'Appetite for Growth' document produced by the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association in March 2012. The sector can play a real part in helping to rebalance and grow our economy. World markets are opening up more than ever, and I know that the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment is consistently working on potential new markets for our local products. We fully support that and look forward to new doors opening.

The agrifood sector is a huge employer across Northern Ireland and has been for many years. Therefore, it must continue to be supported in every way possible. Our farmers have come through many difficult times in the past and have continued to produce top-quality food. The year 2012 was very challenging for our farmers because of the cost of animal feedstuff, the increased costs of fertilisers and the ever-increasing costs of energy and fuel.

Our farm quality assurance scheme, operated by the Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) in Northern Ireland, has proved to be effective. The fact that every cut of meat is labelled with traceability details in the abattoir, under regulated conditions, gives customers confidence. The real risk to consumers comes from processed meat, which, in law, is meat that is defined as fresh until it is minced. It effectively becomes processed when salt, herbs and other products are added.

The risk from processed meat is compounded by the fact that meat is sold as a commodity in the world market and is sold from dealer to dealer without their even seeing or verifying the standards of the produce. Such meat often starts at a low price, and quality can be compromised, but the responsibility for the quality of the raw material lies with processors. The processors who supply meat for burgers and ready meals must put in place an effective quality assurance system to give assurance to the customers that what is on the supermarket shelf is exactly what is specified on the label.

Supermarkets must ensure that processed products are supplied, as per a contract, from their suppliers, have systems in place to verify the quality of the product and take effective action against non-compliance. Supermarkets and their suppliers must be held to account for feeding non-compliant food to the hungry public.

We must continue to promote markets for local produce outside of the UK and get customers to further experience our quality produce with assurance. There is great potential for our local produce in the world markets, and I trust that there will be continued work between our producers and with Invest NI and InterTradeIreland. Trade shows and exhibits can often be beneficial in reaching out to new markets, and I know that our Minister has been leading on that for some time.

We have a great reputation for producing high-quality food. We are concerned at the ongoing incidents surrounding some meat products and call on retailers to place a greater emphasis on local produce. It is important that we continue to work with retailers to ensure that our farmers and processors get a fair deal for their product. I urge the House to support the motion.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am a member of the ETI Committee and support the motion. I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion and thank the proposer for tabling it.

It is useful to acknowledge the support that has been shown for the industry from a number of contributors today. A number of points have been made, which I do not think need to be repeated, but we must remind ourselves that the meat industry is worth £1 million annually in the North's economy. Farmers in the North of Ireland have certainly struggled with low prices and high costs for fertiliser, feed and fuel, so there is no doubt that the sector needs support. DETI, therefore, needs to work with DARD to ensure that that support and those mechanisms are in place.

The recent horse meat controversy has shaken consumers' confidence, but it must be stressed, as Members mentioned, that our local farmers and primary producers were not involved. As the proposer said, our local produce is fully traceable, and its quality is second to none. Consumers are seeking that quality here and abroad, so we need to support the sector and ensure that this is a key part of our export-led strategy towards economic recovery.

I support the motion and look forward to the Minister's response on how those practical measures can be put in place. Go raibh maith agat.

5.15 pm

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Members who brought the important motion to the House for debate. No one needs to be reminded of the huge problems that the agrifood sector has faced over recent weeks. People's trust in food has been shaken. Once that confidence is gone, it is, often, very difficult to get it back. However, it is very important to remember that although the industry may have been caught up in the scandal, producers, namely farmers, have done nothing wrong. I am as confident of the quality of meat that farmers produce today as I was a month ago. We must not allow a small number of cases to hold back an entire industry.

The motion, rightly, calls on retailers to source more food locally. Representing a constituency such as Upper Bann, which is a mix of towns and open countryside, has given me a wonderful insight into the very fine balance between the pressures of producing food on the farm and making it affordable for the wider public. I am pleased that there remains great trust in local farmers and that most consumers have realised that the problem originated in other member states of the European Union. Local farmers produce world-leading products, and, over recent years, the wider agrifood sector has become a beacon of hope in an otherwise difficult economic environment.

It would, however, be wrong for us to stand here today and demand that all food be sourced locally and bought only from local butchers. Although that may be the preferred choice for many people, we need to accept that for others, buying all of their meat in the traditional butcher's setting, with the extra cost, is just not an option.

Supermarkets are to be congratulated for making meat affordable and readily available. However, I believe that the balance has now tipped and that quality may be suffering for the sake of price. One really has to wonder about the contents of a box of burgers being sold for £1. The recent announcement that farm income fell by over 50% in 2012 means that any huge profits being made by supermarkets are, clearly, not being passed on to farmers.

The plight of dairy farmers is well known, but beef producers have also faced an incredibly difficult couple of years of rising costs for fuel, feed and fertiliser while farm-gate prices have not been keeping up. That is why I support the motion's call for the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with retailers to ensure that processors and farmers get a better return for their products.

I expect that, over time, and with the findings of the investigation, we will, one day, learn what went wrong and how it was allowed to happen. It is intolerable that people were deceived into thinking that what looked like perfectly good beef produce, going by the label, actually contained something very different. It is deeply regrettable that the situation was allowed to occur. There are many questions to be answered, not least by the Food Standards Agency and food processors. The number one priority right now, however, must be to ensure that the contents of the food on shelves are as stated on the label and that the wider agrifood sector is not shaken any more than it has been already. I support the motion.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I join Members in congratulating those who brought the motion to the Floor. It provides the Assembly with a timely opportunity to highlight all that is good about Northern Ireland's agrifood and to send a clear message to consumers, not just here in Northern Ireland but throughout the world, that the food produced here is among the best in the world.

I have no hesitation in endorsing the following statement in the motion:

"That this Assembly notes Northern Ireland's excellent reputation for producing high-quality food".

As the Member who moved the motion pointed out, that reputation has been hard won, and we must recognise that in the Chamber today.

My support for the agrifood sector is founded on practical experience. Coming from Fermanagh, I have been surrounded by agriculture all my life, and I have seen at first hand the high-quality produce that comes from our farms. As Enterprise Minister, I have had the opportunity to visit many food processors, large and small, and I have been continually impressed by their drive and concern for quality and excellence.

As Mr Flanagan mentioned, only last week I was with Northern Ireland food companies at the Gulfood show in Abu Dhabi — actually it was in Dubai; I was in Abu Dhabi about something else — and I assure you that there is clear demand in that region and, indeed, across the globe, for the excellent product that we have to offer. I was very encouraged by the contacts that were made and the networking that was achieved at the Gulfood event.

We can be justifiably proud that Northern Ireland has a long tradition of quality food production. That has resulted in a sector that has continued to grow, despite the recession, that has a turnover of some £4 billion and that accounts for almost 20% of total Northern Ireland manufacturing sales, most of which are sold to external markets. The sector also provides employment for approximately 50,000 people, 18,000 of whom are in food processing and many of whom are employed in rural areas. Indeed, as we heard, the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association report has highlighted the potential for the creation of up to 15,000 new jobs in the sector by 2020.

So, in short, the sector is very important to the Northern Ireland economy. That is why it is recognised as a priority sector in our economic strategy, with the distribution of the sector's activity right across Northern Ireland supporting the economic strategy's cross-cutting principle of balanced subregional growth.

Agrifood has also been recognised as a priority in the Programme for Government for the very first time. The Programme for Government commits us to developing a strategic plan that will identify priorities for the sector through to 2020. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development and I have appointed the Agri-Food Strategy Board to develop the strategic plan, and we anticipate receipt of that plan in

the next few weeks. There is no doubt that the Executive fully recognise the importance and, more than that, the value of our agrifood sector. That is based on the excellent quality of the food that we produce.

That brings me to the second point in the motion, which is that the Assembly:

"expresses concern at the ongoing incidents surrounding meat products".

The revelations in recent weeks about the contamination of processed meat products highlight a problem that appears to extend the length and breadth of Europe, impacting, as many Members indicated, on consumer confidence. This is a European-wide issue. In fact, it is even outside Europe. The Environment Secretary, Owen Paterson, correctly described it as a Europe-wide scandal.

Food businesses throughout the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and right across Europe have been the subject of what appears to be widespread and systematic fraud. I am encouraged that governments across Europe are taking action to resolve the issue, and EU-wide DNA testing of processed meat products is under way as a means to raise consumer confidence in such products.

We have confidence that the Commission is treating the meat contamination as a case of fraudulent misuse of the labelling system for economic gain, and it has tasked Europol with co-ordinating different criminal investigations right across Europe. Closer to home, the Food Standards Agency and the police, working with our counterparts across Europe, are involved in what is a complicated and far-reaching investigation. The FSA will continue to work closely with businesses and trade bodies along the whole food chain to try to get to the bottom of what is a totally unacceptable situation to root out any illegal activity and enforce good safety and authenticity regulation. It plans to take whatever action is necessary.

I assure the House that DETI and DARD are working closely with the FSA in Northern Ireland to ensure that all efforts will be made to protect that hard-won reputation of our home-grown produce and, indeed, its contribution to the economy. We cannot — this point was made by a couple of Members — allow the Europe-wide fraud to tarnish our long track record as a source of quality meat produce. The meat sector is an important part of our agrifood sector, and all efforts must be made to protect its reputation. I welcome the fact that, over the past six months, the price of beef

throughout the UK has increased. Our quality beef, which is reared on a grass-based system, has a justified reputation as a premium product. Consumers can have absolute confidence that it is totally natural and of the highest quality available.

The traceability controls in our agrifood supply chain emphasise the benefits to consumers and businesses of purchasing local produce. There are environmental, economic and social benefits, and there is also the integrity and safety of our produce. The Northern Ireland beef and lamb farm quality assurance scheme celebrated its 20th anniversary this year. Therefore, we have a long and successful track record of delivering extensive traceability controls through the supply chain.

Mr Byrne raised the issue of European traceability. Of course, there is no issue with traceability and quality assurance for produce that originates in Northern Ireland. The traceability runs from the farm right through the processing system and onwards. However, there is no quality assurance for produce that is imported into Northern Ireland. That is a European issue, or perhaps even an outside-of-Europe issue. It is something that, hopefully, Europe will look at when it carries through the DNA tests.

Our track record in Northern Ireland in delivering quality meat has enabled companies to move ahead of the pack in events such as the UK Great Taste Awards. Hannan Meats was the supreme champion last year. The year before that, it was another butcher from Northern Ireland: McCartney's butchers in Moira. They are both great examples of how a Northern Ireland company can work with Invest Northern Ireland on new product development, employee training and export marketing, and then become a leader in its class. Hannan Meats and McCartney's are two examples that show why we should continue to promote our local red meat on the export market.

The motion states that we should encourage:

"retailers to source more food products from Northern Ireland; and ... work with retailers to ensure that processors and farmers get a better return for their products."

Obviously, I am in complete agreement with those points. The large retailers have an absolutely crucial role to play in restoring consumer confidence. The meat contamination scandal has very much demonstrated what consumers want. They need to have confidence in the food that they buy. We need

to provide that confidence in future. There is a real opportunity for retailers to meet ever-more exacting consumer demands by sourcing more food locally. I accept what Mr Lunn said about retailers: when they come to Northern Ireland, they are very keen to tell us how much they are sourcing from local farms, but at what price? That is the key element. There has been a downward pressure on prices. Almost everybody in the House made the point that, although food bills are increasing, the spending ability of households in Northern Ireland is coming under increasing pressure. The retailers are saying that they must get it for less. That, of course, has an impact on not just our farmers but our food and meat processors.

There is clearly a need to engage. I intend to engage with the major retailers so that we can have a real conversation about the price of food. Mrs Overend spoke about the supermarket adjudicator. I intend to meet her. I will indicate that it is vital that the body have teeth. We need to ensure that we can achieve a fair return right along the supply chain, not just for the retailers. The major retailers recognise the need for constructive engagement. Some of you will have seen some of the ads that Tesco placed recently. Tesco's aim is to bring its meat production closer to home, and it plans to work closer with British farmers in sourcing its meat, which I welcome. However, there is a long way to travel. We need to ensure that the retailers recognise the damage that has been caused and that we can help them. I think that it is an opportunity for our meat processors and farmers in Northern Ireland.

5.30 pm

I am very proud of the red meat industry, as all of us in the House should be. I will work with DARD and support the producers and processors in any way that I can.

Mr Frew: I rise, of course, to commend the motion to the House, I am glad that the debate has gone the way it has. It has been a spirited debate, in which Members supported and defended our agrifood sector, particularly the local meat producers.

It is vital that we keep championing the local producers, farmers and processors who do this so well, and who produce quality produce that is second to none throughout the world. I will never grow tired of echoing that message, nor will I shy away from it. I will echo it every hour of every day if I have to. I will defend and, more importantly, promote our produce. It is fully

traceable from the gate to the plate, and it is green, clean, grass-fed meat. I have been saying those slogans so often and for so long that I think I say them in my sleep.

We cannot afford to allow the scandals to hamper or reduce the capabilities of our agrifood sector to promote, sell and export our produce across the world. It is vital that we take advantage of the present scandals. We can prove how traceable and clean our food is, so we have to promote our produce in that way.

Only last week, we had a debate about the giants of the agrifood sector: poultry meat; beef and sheep meat; bakeries; and milk and milk products. It is vital that we promote this industry. It is so important to our economy and affects every corner of this Province. It is vital that we talk about this as often as we can, echo the messages that our farmers and local butchers tell us, get them on the airwaves and the TV and tell the people around the world and in Northern Ireland that the meat we produce is safe, clean and of top quality. It can be sold around the world, and it is second to none throughout the world.

I am the Chair of the Agriculture Committee, and my Deputy Chair, Joe Byrne, also spoke in the debate. The Committee has written to the supermarkets. When we were out and about talking to farmers, we saw that there was anger. There was anger, right in the throes of the scandal, about how this could have happened. We have a traceable system, and when we sell our meat, it is proven to be of high quality. We wrote to the supermarkets asking them to explain their food supply chains and how they think this could have happened. We also asked them, if fraud is happening, where they think it is happening; what they are doing to protect the food supply chain; why the supply chain is stacked so much against primary producers and farmers; and why they are not protecting farmers better. Given that farmers produce top quality meat, why do the supermarkets not use it more? Why do they shy away from it? Why do they not spend the extra money to get the best-quality meat they can to stack their shelves? Why do they not sell the best produce, rather than trying to make their large profit margins even larger?

I do not see much of that profit coming down to farmers and producers. In fact, it is stacked heavily against our primary producers — the very people who produce so much top-quality meat. They have been let down, and that is something that we cannot and should not stand for. In the throes of this debacle and in the heat of this scandal, we showed a united front

throughout the House and throughout the Departments. However, it is fair to say that the Agriculture Minister went missing for the first weeks when she should have been out with me, promoting and protecting our industry. She did come back, she did recover, and we did show a united front, but it was slow, and I hope that she has learned a lesson from that. As Agriculture Minister, she is there to protect, to promote and to enhance the farmers of this country, and she needs to do that much more quickly than she has in this scandal. I hope that there will be lessons learnt, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will wind up this very important debate. William Irwin, who moved the motion, talked about farmers not getting a fair share of the profit and that that trend is all too prevalent in our industry. They are being hammered at every end by the other people in the supply chain — something that I have talked about. He talked about the trend back to the local butcher's shop and to the meat counters of our supermarkets. He also mentioned the fall in farmers' incomes and, again, how farmers, despite being under pressure all the time, are still producing top-quality meat.

Phil Flanagan talked about the message that was going out to the public. He mentioned his meals out buying big juicy steaks. I was going to ask for an intervention to see whether he had had sirloin or fillet, but I thought better of it. However, it is good that we can show a united front to our industry.

Joe Byrne is the Deputy Chairperson of the Agriculture Committee. We work well together in that Committee, and I support his words in the debate, but we need better Europe-wide traceability systems. He talked about the various roles and responsibilities of Departments in Northern Ireland. Yes, lessons could be learned. He also talked about the disjoint, and that is something that we could do better. He also talked about farm incomes and how the farmer is getting hammered every year — year in, year out. He also mentioned applying pressure on the supermarkets, which is vital, because they are such an important part of the supply chain.

Sandra Overend said that the motion was timely and congratulated us on it. We commend the support that she has given us, and the industry, at this time. Her message has been on-message, too, and I congratulate her on that. We have shown a united front. It is important to keep reminding people how well we produce meat. It should be exported, and it is exported throughout the world. She also mentioned how deeply horse meat has

penetrated our systems and our food chains. Of course, that was a worry, and we await eagerly the end of this investigation and the ongoing DNA testing.

Trevor Lunn talked about supermarkets saying that they were sourcing local produce. What are the percentages? That is a very good question that we should put to the supermarkets. What do you mean by local? That is a big issue for some trademarks and some named producers and processors. How local is local? Why are they not checking their supply chains? How did this happen? How did they allow it to happen? He talked about the price of food and about what supermarkets are prepared to pay for produce, and what the public is prepared to pay for produce. This is a very important debate. It is something that we grapple with — and governments grapple with all over the world. It is vital.

Gordon Dunne, my colleague, talked about the pressures on farmers and the differences in fresh meat produced here compared with imported processed meat. He talked about the great potential for our agrifood sector to take advantage of this scandal and to show the world the traceable and clean meat that we produce.

Maeve McLaughlin talked about how vital this was to our economy. We have a fully traceable system, which is proof. I had no doubt whatsoever, when I was promoting our industry, that we could stand by that traceable system.

Sam Gardiner talked about the confidence in food having been shaken, but our farmers have done nothing wrong, and we cannot allow a few bad apples to destroy our industry, which is so vital to our economy.

Again, the Minister talked about the excellent work she was doing for the agrifood sector and about the Agri-Food Strategy Board, which is a joint initiative with the Agriculture and Rural Development Minister. She talked about the Europe-wide DNA testing —

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

Mr Frew: — that is in practice at the moment. She mentioned that work was ongoing with the FSA and other Departments. The Minister also mentioned the fact that the meat that we produce is so traceable that we should be standing over it and exporting it all round the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes Northern Ireland's excellent reputation for producing high-quality food; expresses concern at the ongoing incidents surrounding meat products; encourages retailers to source more food products from Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to work with retailers to ensure that processors and farmers get a better return for their products.

Adjourned at 5.40 pm.

Written Ministerial Statement: Regional Development

The content of this written ministerial statement has not been subject to the normal official reporting (Hansard) process and is as received at the time from the Minister.

Transport Northern Ireland

*Published at 12:00 Noon
on Monday 4 March 2013*

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): In recent years my Department has been considering the best model for the future delivery of both roads and public transport authority functions. As a result I have agreed that in line with a number of other jurisdictions, there should be a single organisation within my Department responsible for the delivery of roads functions and securing public transport services. This new organisation will be called Transport NI and it will come into effect from 1st April 2013.

Transport NI will be a combination of two existing business units within my Department: Roads Service and Public Transport Finance and Governance; and as a result there will be no impact on staff numbers or other resources within my Department.

Transport NI will be responsible for the following functions:

All functions currently delivered by Roads Service including:

- The design of major and minor road improvement schemes including schemes to improve road safety;

- The maintenance of the road network including roads, footways, bridges, street lights, etc;

- The management of the road network including the provision of a winter service, as well as managing motorway communications and signalised junctions;

Securing the delivery of public transport services; and in the future

The development of local public transport plans.

The new arrangements will better coordinate the management of the road network and the delivery of public transport services in the future.



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