

# Official Report (Hansard)

Tuesday 21 May 2013  
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# Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 21 May 2013

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

*Members observed two minutes' silence.*

## Ministerial Statements

### Teacher Education Infrastructure

**Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning):** In November 2011, I made a statement to the Assembly concerning the issues relating to initial teacher education which affect my Department. I am a strong advocate of increased integration across our education system, including the training of teachers, and recognise that there are strong economic, financial, social and educational reasons for that. In my previous statement, I outlined my concerns that the system for the education of teachers in Northern Ireland was not sustainable. To best achieve longer-term improvements in education outcomes, it is important that Northern Ireland has a system of teacher education that is both financially stable and sufficiently flexible to address the needs of an increasingly shared society.

Therefore, I announced a two-stage study of the teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The first part of the study was to carry out an objective analysis of the financial stability and sustainability of the two university colleges. The intention was that the first stage of the study would: consider the costs and affordability of the current system as compared to benchmark provision elsewhere; outline the rationale for the various funding streams; and seek to forecast the degree to which, all things considered, the institutions are sustainable into the future. The second stage of the study will set out options for a more shared and integrated system for the delivery and funding of teacher education.

The work on stage one has been carried out by independent consultants Grant Thornton. It was factual in nature, and I would like to share some of the findings. However, before I move on to those, I must say that I have no doubts as to the quality of the teaching carried out by any of the five providers of initial teacher education. Indeed, all the providers received good reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate

(ETI). Also in the past year, the providers, particularly the two university colleges, performed well in the national league tables. St Mary's University College performed exceptionally in the last national student survey and is to be congratulated for that. My concerns are directed at the fragmented nature of the initial teacher education sector and at the direct and opportunity costs that are consequently borne by us all. I do not believe that any change in structure will impact on quality. Indeed, it may well add to it.

The study found that the cost of training teachers in the university colleges is significantly higher than elsewhere. The current method of funding on a per capita basis was introduced in 2008 and linked to the unit of funding used in England by the then Training and Development Agency. However, that unit of funding was then enhanced in Northern Ireland by several premia to bring it to a level that it was assumed would sustain the colleges. The result is that the base unit of funding is enhanced by 32%. The premia were intended to compensate the colleges for the unavoidable additional costs incurred as a result of their small size and other diseconomies of scale. Let me be clear: the primary objective was to ensure the sustainability of the two colleges.

The research completed in stage one shows that Stranmillis and St Mary's are the only teacher training establishments in the UK that receive premia additional to their core funding. In 2011-12, that amounted to £2.16 million, and it has led to significant differences in the costs incurred in training a teacher here compared with elsewhere. In 2011-12, the cost of training a teacher in the colleges in Northern Ireland was almost 40% higher than in the comparator English institutions cited in the report. Excluding fees generated from the students themselves, the colleges here received grant funding of £6,412 per trainee teacher, while the English comparator institutions received £4,590.

The annual cost of training a teacher in our university colleges is also significantly higher

than the average cost of training a teacher at our local universities. One year of a Bachelor of Education (BEd) course at St Mary's and Stranmillis costs the taxpayer 32% more than a one-year Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course at Queen's or the University of Ulster. I recognise that there are always difficulties in comparing the costs incurred by institutions in Northern Ireland with those incurred elsewhere. Costs are gathered and categorised slightly differently, and it is always difficult to come up with an agreed comparator. However, one can examine the level of funding being provided to institutions to train a teacher.

Under the new tuition fee regime in England, comparator institutions are offering initial teacher education courses at fees of between £7,500 and £8,000 in the current academic year. No further funding for initial teacher education is provided by government. The university colleges in Northern Ireland are paid £5,886 per student and receive a further £3,465 by way of tuition fees from each student. That totals £9,351, which is 15% to 25% higher than the comparator institutions in England receive.

Some will argue that that is a reasonable price for the taxpayer to pay to sustain the two university colleges. However, those differential costs are not the full story. The report also highlights that the teacher training activities in the two university colleges are further supported by income from my Department for non-teacher training courses in other areas. St Mary's offers a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in liberal arts, and Stranmillis offers a BA in early childhood studies and a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in health and leisure.

The colleges were permitted to diversify their educational offerings in the late 1990s as a means of generating additional income to underpin their financial position. Those places were initially offered on a fee-only basis to students. However, in 2008, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) agreed to provide additional per capita funding, including a premium of £560 per student per annum to help the colleges balance their books.

St Mary's currently has 286 diversified places, while Stranmillis has 277 places. In the current year, the funding provided to the two colleges for those places amounts to £1.9 million. Although I acknowledge that those courses are of good quality, they are primarily funded to ensure that both colleges remain financially viable and can continue to deliver their initial teacher education courses.

Notwithstanding their inherent value, there is clearly a substantial opportunity cost attached to them, particularly in light of the economy's need for more graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Should we simply ignore that to preserve the financial viability of the institutions? Should we, at least, consider whether the future interests of our young people and our economy might be better served through the direction of some of those places and some teacher-training places towards STEM?

I put that question in the context presented by the report, which clearly indicates that we are spending more to train a teacher, for what can best be described as an uncertain employment market, than to train an engineer. Under our current system, it costs £23,500 to train a teacher, and, arguably, we are training too many; and it costs £21,000 to train an engineer, and, arguably, we are training too few.

Statistics produced by the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland indicate that around 1,500 people who graduated in the past five years, and who are registered with the council, are not currently employed in the teaching profession in Northern Ireland.

I hear some say that a teaching degree, in the same way as other degrees, provides general employability skills. I acknowledge that, but it takes four years to obtain a BEd and three years for BA, which is another difference in cost.

As regards the cost of initial teacher education in Northern Ireland, I will conclude from the work carried out that the cost is higher here by almost £2,000 per teacher when compared to the colleges' comparator peer group. The higher cost is directly attributable to the premia paid to the colleges on a per capita basis. Those premia are not paid to teacher training institutions anywhere else in the UK and amount to £2 million per year.

Northern Ireland also provides funding to the colleges of education for non-initial teacher education courses to the value of another £2 million in order to ensure that the colleges remain viable. The case for funding the number of non-teacher-training places at current levels rests largely on their contribution to sustaining the colleges' initial teacher-training activities, rather than the wider interests of the economy. Of the public funds they receive from my Department, given the various premia and the non-initial teacher education (ITE) places, only

47% and 54% of that is directly for the training of teachers in the respective colleges.

That is the back drop against which we must assess the current and future sustainability of our colleges of education. In tackling this issue, the consultants engaged with the institutions and looked at their financial projections for several years ahead. The two colleges readily shared their financial forecasts and assumptions, and I thank them for their willingness to do so. The consultants found that both colleges are currently financially stable and that both forecast that they will earn surpluses up to the year ending in July 2015. Both have managed their expenditure levels downward as a result of a decline in income in recent periods.

The work also entailed an examination of the longer term position over the next 10 years, based on the assumptions put forward by the colleges. It was found that St Mary's is forecast to maintain a positive income and expenditure reserve and cash balance, but the trend towards a deficit position each year post-2018 will eventually deplete its reserves and cash balance.

Similarly, Stranmillis's longer term projections, based on its assumptions, indicate that it will maintain a positive income and expenditure reserve and cash balance, but, again, the trend towards a deficit position each year post-2021 will eventually deplete its reserves and cash balance. However, Stranmillis will remain vulnerable to any additional requirement for capital expenditure across the forecast period over and above its existing backlog maintenance requirements.

The immediate outlook for the colleges, therefore, seems to be not too bleak. However, the assumptions used by the colleges are heavily dependent on future levels of initial teacher education core funding, which includes the premia, the associated tuition fees from students and the number of non-initial teacher places. Therefore, the current financial position is heavily dependent on continued disproportionate subsidy.

The consultants examined the colleges' sensitivity to changes in those factors, and a rather more concerning picture emerged. Eight different scenarios were examined to assess the colleges' sensitivity to change. Those ranged from a 10% decrease in per capita funding, a 15% decrease, the removal of the premia, funding at the comparator English rates, a 10% reduction in the non-teacher

training numbers over a three-year period, and combinations of several of those scenarios.

In each case, the results indicate that both colleges are unlikely to be financially viable unless significant efficiency savings can be obtained or additional income earned. The point at which they would begin to sustain annual deficits would come much earlier than anticipated.

#### **10.45 am**

To argue that those scenarios are unrealistic shows a misunderstanding of the economic context in which we operate. For example, over the past two years, both colleges have had to sustain efficiencies amounting to 12%, and we cannot say that, over time, further reductions of that order will not be required again. The removal of the premia alone would have the greatest single impact on the colleges. That change would also bring the cost of teacher training more into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. The work demonstrates that the colleges are heavily reliant on maintaining intake numbers and grant levels per student to remain financially viable. That will not be news to the colleges, which have acknowledged that in their strategic documents.

The overall conclusion that I draw from the work is that Northern Ireland is paying too much to educate its teachers. Our main teacher education providers — the two university colleges — are highly vulnerable to changes in funding rates and student numbers. The quality of teaching and the educational outcomes for our children depend on a financially sustainable and stable environment in which our educational leaders can concentrate on the training experience offered to their students, rather than the bottom line of their organisations. Therefore, we need to examine and understand the case for the reform of teacher education provision in Northern Ireland. This covers five institutions: Queen's University, the University of Ulster and the Open University, alongside Stranmillis and St Mary's.

Teacher education elsewhere in Europe and further afield has moved away from small, specialist teacher education institutions. Comparable teacher education institutions in England are significantly larger than in Northern Ireland. In Scotland and Wales, initial teacher education provision is wholly delivered in universities. In the Republic of Ireland, a recent international review of the future provision of ITE recommended the merger, collaboration or closure of the 19 existing ITE providers down to

six providers linked to universities. The trend is towards educating teachers in larger institutions where training can be informed and supported by ongoing research in the field of education. I am not an educationalist, nor do I intend to stray into the realm of my colleague the Minister of Education on the content of teacher training, but I believe that some change is required in the institutions that we employ to deliver that training.

Some of our current institutions have traditionally serviced different sectors in our education system and had enrolments derived predominately from particular sections of our community. That has begun to change to some degree in recent years. However, our education system and pupils will be best served through a significant step change in the extent to which our teachers of the future are trained alongside each other.

I believe that the training of teachers in Northern Ireland within the current system is inefficient, and the report on stage 1 of the study provides substantial evidence to support that view. The funding being provided for teacher education could be used better by the teacher training institutions if they were prepared to move towards a more shared or integrated system. The second stage of the study of teacher education infrastructure in Northern Ireland will set out options for a more shared and integrated system for the delivery and funding of teacher education. Everything should be on the table. Matters to be considered for greater collaboration between the institutions could include services, facilities and, in particular, joint teaching. At institutional level, alternatives to the current arrangements may include models such as some or all institutions coming together through some type of confederated arrangement between a number of providers, through to a fully integrated single teacher training institution with one or more campuses.

I would like the issues regarding equality of opportunity and equality of access to be considered. This includes the admissions systems deployed by the institutions and the opportunity to acquire the certificate in religious education. I congratulate the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools for amending its previous requirement so that teachers who have been made redundant can seek employment in a maintained primary or nursery school even if they do not possess the certificate but undertake to obtain it within three years of appointment. In turn, wider liberalisation of the circumstances in which the certificate is required or the removal of the

teacher exemption from fair employment law may overtake this aspect of the review. I acknowledge that faith-based schools may have a particular ethos, but I argue that all qualified teachers should be recruited on the merit principle only and should be capable of teaching in any environment.

The second phase of the study will be led by a person with an international reputation in education. It is my intention that the individual who will review our teacher training infrastructure will bring forward worked-up options for further consideration. I plan to make an appointment in that regard within the next few weeks. I will want to ensure that the person is given scope to develop his or her own methodology for taking the initiative forward. I would envisage, however, that he or she will wish to engage in a very meaningful way with representatives of the five teacher training providers. Once that aspect of the review has been reported, my officials and I will enter into further dialogue with the various institutions, with the intention of finding an agreed way forward.

The process I have outlined will, hopefully, bring about change on a consensual basis that will benefit the teachers to be trained in the future and, in turn, the children whom they will help to educate. Teacher education must contribute to a world-class education system. It must be financially efficient, sustainable and affordable, and it must reflect our vision that children are educated through a system that is open, inclusive and shared.

**Mr Swann (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning):** I thank the Minister for his statement. Minister, your statement refers very much to cost. I hope that quality is not degraded against cost, because the quality of our teachers in Northern Ireland has been held in high regard. You referred to teachers versus engineers. I hope that you agree that, without the good teachers getting the principles right in primary school and secondary school, we will never have the world-class engineers that we need to take that step forward. So, I think it is crass to compare the cost of training a teacher with the cost of training an engineer in the first instance.

You say that everything should be on the table, but, by doing that, you introduce even more uncertainty into our already uncertain education and teacher training systems. St Mary's is sustainable until 2018, and Stranmillis is sustainable until 2021, and that is with the status quo. Introducing any degree of uncertainty would make that sustainability even



more uncertain, put those colleges in an uneven place and make it harder for them to maintain that sustainability. Will the Minister comment on non-departmental public body (NDPB) status and how that would affect that sustainability? If you took a decision there, would it affect the further sustainability of those colleges?

You referred to your appointee for the second stage. It comes across very much that this will be a headhunted ministerial appointee. Can the Minister give the House a reassurance that that appointee will have the freedom to act for the good of teacher training in Northern Ireland and will not be appointed solely to deliver the ministerial decision and ministerial political will that your party has with regard to teacher training? Will he have the freedom to deliver that? Will the Minister also give us the terms of reference? I know that he said that the appointee would have the freedom to choose his own methodology, but can the Minister give us the terms of reference that he will be able to apply to that methodology?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Chair for his comments and congratulate him on probably packing in a record number of questions into an intervention. I will do my best to work through all of those.

At the outset, it is important to say that this is not something that we should look at simply in terms of cost. The Member is right to make that point. First of all, however, we cannot escape issues of cost and, indeed, opportunity cost. We have scarce resources available to us, and it is important that we make the best use of those in the wider interests of the economy overall.

I also reject the supposition that it is a case of cost versus quality. Through a reform of the system, in which we will place the structures on a much more sustainable basis, we may, in fact, end up improving educational outcomes. Let me go back to the former proposal to merge Stranmillis and Queen's University. That was primarily driven by educational outcomes rather than simply being an issue of cost savings. There was a view that linking in a specialist teacher training college with a wider university would actually enhance the ability of teachers to be educated in a much wider environment and to link in with quality emerging research. We made particular reference to some best practice in that regard, the merger of Peabody College with Vanderbilt University in Tennessee being a prime example. In some respects, it is the world leader in teacher training.

Are we making a false analogy between the cost of a teacher and that of an engineer? I certainly respect the fact that we need to invest and invest properly in the training of teachers. However, the wider point that I was making in that regard is that, at present, we spend more to train a teacher and, arguably, train too many teachers in Northern Ireland, with employment figures suggesting that teachers struggle to find work. In contrast, we spend less to train engineers. Often, the training of an engineer requires investment in significant equipment. We clearly have a need to invest more in engineers. Engineering is a growth area of the economy, and we have significant opportunities for indigenous growth and to attract inward investment on the basis of the quality of our engineering students and graduates.

I reject the suggestion that we are creating more uncertainty for institutions. We are in a most uncertain situation. The point that the report is trying to get across is that the institutions are in a perilous situation. On the surface, their figures may be fine for the next number of years, but those figures reflect significant subsidy that is above and beyond what happens anywhere else in these islands. They are also based on current teacher training numbers. That decision is made by my colleague the Minister of Education, and it is an issue that has been subject to significant debate and comment. Some people are of the opinion that we put too many people through the system at present and that the employment opportunities do not warrant the current numbers in training.

The House will be aware that, recently, the Office for National Statistics, which is entirely separate from the Executive and, indeed, the UK Government, reclassified Stranmillis and St Mary's as non-departmental public bodies. There is a strong argument for appealing that with regard to the particular governance of St Mary's. My Department, alongside the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), is endeavouring to do that, though I have to confess that it is proving to be a difficult and uphill struggle. We are seeking to do it nonetheless.

The issue with Stranmillis is more complicated, given its particular nature of governance, not least because the chair and the board of governors are ministerial appointees in the main. We are, nonetheless, prepared to look at that. In the short term, we have to look at end-year flexibility as, perhaps, the most practical thing that we can do in that regard. However, changing the classification is on the agenda and may well be captured in a wider review.

The final point that the Chair made was on the nature of the appointment. I am seeking to appoint someone of international standing. We are in discussion with a number of individuals and hope to make that appointment in the near future. The Member is right to highlight that they will have considerable freedom to shape their discussions. I want them to sit down with the colleges and other stakeholders and talk through the options, individually and collectively, and see what emerges from that. When we have a number of options that have been drawn together as part of that process, I, in turn, with my officials, will sit down with colleges and try to find agreement on the way forward.

I appreciate that that was rather a long answer. Hopefully, I have addressed all the comments that the Member raised.

**Mr Speaker:** I know that the Chair of the Committee for Employment and Learning had some latitude and time in framing his questions to the Minister. Quite a number of Members want to make contributions on the statement. From here onwards, I expect only questions.

**Mr Buchanan:** I have only one question, Mr Speaker, you can rest assured of that. I thank the Minister for his statement. The thrust of the report seems to be a move towards a more integrated, single teacher training system. I note that the Minister said that, irrespective of a particular ethos, all qualified teachers should be recruited only on merit and be capable of teaching in any environment. Does he, then, agree that one of the main barriers to that is the certificate in religious education? Can he advise the House what discussions he has had with the Minister of Education to remove that discriminatory element completely from the system so that it leaves a more level playing field to move to a system such as the one that he talked about in his report?

**11.00 am**

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Deputy Chair for his comments. I have not had direct discussions with the Minister of Education on that point, but he is well aware of my personal views and those of my party. Indeed, we had a very useful debate about it in the Assembly only a matter of weeks ago.

I certainly respect the fact that different schools will have a different ethos and we are likely to have a number of sectors in our system for the foreseeable future. It is important to stress that

teachers are professionals. We are training high-quality professionals in Northern Ireland who should be adaptable and be able to move and teach in any environment.

The key reform that we need is a change in the fair employment legislation to remove the teacher exemption. That will unlock everything. Beyond that, there could be circumstances where, under existing equality law, we had the option to make some knowledge about diversity a genuine occupational requirement to teach in schools. However, it may be that, rather than having a certificate in religious education for the Catholic sector, all our teachers could be trained in the ethos of the whole range of schools in Northern Ireland so that they are completely adaptable and flexible and can teach in any environment.

The final aspect is the differential access to the Catholic certificate, which is the most immediate area that falls under my remit. The certificate is embedded in the curriculum of St Mary's, so all students who go there will get that as part of their degree and are therefore able to apply to virtually any primary school in Northern Ireland. Students in other institutions have to get it by distance learning, so, while the opportunity technically exists, it is slightly further out of reach for them. Those students are potentially more restricted in their ability to apply for jobs in what is a very competitive job market, as all Members know.

**Mr F McCann:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement to the House this morning. Is it not the case that the university colleges are financially viable as long as the student numbers are maintained and the funding model is not changed? In other words, like other higher education institutions, they require supportive government policy to develop. St Mary's and Stranmillis will become non-viable only if the Minister takes actions to make them non-viable. Do you propose to take such actions in the face of opposition?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his questions. At this stage, I am not proposing to do anything other than what was announced in my statement: we are undertaking the second stage of the review, with the objective of placing the system on a sustainable basis.

I have my personal opinion: I want a single integrated system in Northern Ireland, which should not be a surprise to anybody. However, I appreciate that I have to work with institutions and other Members in the House and we need

to explore the issues to see whether we can find consensus on a different way forward. I appreciate the Member's argument that the institutions are viable today, but it is important that we reiterate the point that they are viable because of significant subsidy. Members may wish to justify that, but, if they do so, they are making a decision that that is more important than spending that resource on other aspects of education and training in Northern Ireland or, indeed, on other aspects of public policy. If that is the case, so be it, but we have a very clear evidence base to suggest that we train too many teachers in Northern Ireland. To me, simply asking the colleges to train a certain number of teachers to make them financially viable seems a rather strange way of going about it. What we are doing, in essence, is training people in subjects that we know the economy does not particularly need, with the result that their jobs prospects will be extremely tight.

Members quite rightly identified the need to invest in areas such as ICT, agrifood and engineering. We are doing wonderful work to develop our local economy. We are reaching out to businesses elsewhere in the world and telling them to come to Northern Ireland. I have the job of trying to quality assure that and telling investors that we are training people in Northern Ireland in the right skills for the jobs of the future and will have a critical mass of people coming through. However, there is clear evidence today that, in that regard, we are not using our money as effectively as we could. If Members want to maintain that situation, so be it, but they cannot then come back and say that more needs to be done in other areas to boost the economy because we will be making choices that may not make a terrible amount of sense.

**Mr P Ramsey:** I welcome the Minister's detailed statement to the House this morning. I acknowledge the significant contribution of St Mary's and Stranmillis as diverse and faith-based institutions and the high quality of teaching that they provide. Does the Minister acknowledge that universities and colleges have put in place economic packages and cost reductions? Will he outline to the House whether those measures have been successful?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Ramsey for his comments and join him in praising St Mary's and Stranmillis for the quality of their teaching and the wider student experience that they offer. Both colleges have been asked to achieve 12% efficiency savings over the first two years of this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

That is precisely the same requirement as was passed on to the rest of the higher education system, so they have not been treated any differently in that respect. They have been treated neither more nor less favourably. They have demonstrated an ability to operate on a more efficient basis, and I recognise that they strive constantly to do that. That has, to a certain extent, extended their viability by a number of years, but I do not want Members to get the impression that that suddenly makes them sustainable in the long term. As things stand and all things being equal, even if we do not touch the funding arrangements, both colleges will move into deficit in the next decade. In the shorter term, if we make decisions based on the value for money of what we do currently, the immediate prospects of both become much more questionable.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for his statement and join him in recognising the high quality and hard work of our teachers across Northern Ireland. I thank him for the decisive action that he is taking to develop robust evidence to inform decisions on a way forward for a shared and integrated system. What are the key merits of an integrated system of teacher training in Northern Ireland?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his question. It is important to understand that this is not simply an issue of cost. Clearly, there are important steps that we should take to ensure that we spend our resources as efficiently as possible, but a much more shared and, in particular, integrated system will benefit teacher training. Although the experience of our students is good, putting them into a much wider framework can make that experience even better. The linkage to quality research as part of the teacher training experience would, in particular, be a major beneficial outcome and produce even better teachers than we have at present in Northern Ireland.

People comment that it is bizarre that, in our current situation in Northern Ireland, our teachers are trained separately. I appreciate that Stranmillis has moved over the past number of years and its enrolment has diversified, but Stranmillis still draws considerably more students from the Protestant section of the community and St Mary's draws its students almost exclusively from the Catholic section of the community. As we move towards a much more shared society in Northern Ireland — I believe that all Members are committed to that — training our teachers alongside one another and training people from different backgrounds beside one another will have a beneficial outcome for society as a whole and

for the future of our education system in particular.

**Mr Ross:** I agree with the Minister that we train too many teachers and that there are not enough teaching jobs. We need to bear that in mind. What is the Minister's longer-term vision for teacher training in Northern Ireland? Is it for two institutions, one based in Coleraine and one at Queen's? If so, how will he ensure that he gets buy-in from Stranmillis and, perhaps more challengingly, St Mary's in getting around all the challenges surrounding ethos?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his question. He was right to acknowledge the context in which we operate. I have to be honest with the Member and the House: this will not be an easy task. These are institutions that are very much part of the fabric of the community in Northern Ireland. I appreciate how a lot of people feel about the situation.

People are aware that I have a personal desire to see integrated education much more developed across Northern Ireland. That would include teacher education. However, I have to take a step back and facilitate a process of engagement. It is important to stress at this stage that everything and any potential outcome should be on the table. We are not being prescriptive about what that outcome should be. It is possible to predict and speculate on a range of outcomes. They could range from one or more integrated systems, as the Member outlined, based around our two universities. We could also see a system in which we have a number of providers that perhaps come together through much closer collaboration, including joint teaching. We could see integrated systems that are based on a number of campuses. All that is up for discussion. It is important that we allow the process to develop over the next number of months. I certainly hope that the colleges will engage constructively with the process and understand that it is in their interests and the interests of the education system in Northern Ireland that they do so.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. In your statement of November 2011, you told us that the situation that we have in the North for the training of our teachers was not sustainable. That was before the independent report. Are you still definitive about that today? Will the Employment and Learning Committee have an opportunity to scrutinise the report and question the author?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for her question. I absolutely stand by what was said in

November 2011. What I am saying today is very much the same conclusion. That has been vindicated by the report from Grant Thornton. Our system of teacher education in Northern Ireland as currently designed and structured is not sustainable. Reform has to take place if we are to really capture what is in the best interests of teacher training and the wider economy.

We provided members of the Committee with a full copy of the report this morning. It will also be on my Department's website. We will be more than happy to engage with the Committee through detailed evidence sessions. We had discussions with the Chair of the Committee this morning about some items over the next number of weeks. We will ensure that there is a proper evidence session around this.

**Mr Douglas:** I thank the Minister for his statement. The Committee visited St Mary's college and was very impressed with the vibrancy and commitment. It is a college that is very much at the heart of the community. There is a lot of talk in the Assembly about diversity and ethos. The Minister has agreed about sustainability and quality, but what about diversity in this situation?

Another thing that came out of those discussions was that people in St Mary's told us that they were definitely not going away.

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his question. I understand the perspective from St Mary's. No doubt I will receive plenty of representations in that regard over the coming days and months. There is no question or debate over the quality of the experience in St Mary's. It does extremely well in national student surveys, in particular, but also in wider inspections.

Diversity is very important. We do not have a one-size-fits-all approach in Northern Ireland; we have a very diverse society, and it is getting even more diverse. That is something that we should embrace and welcome. We do not have to respect and acknowledge diversity through the fragmentation of our teacher education system or other aspects of our education system. We want to promote sharing in both respects, but sharing is not about some homogenised society in which we treat everyone the same. Under that umbrella of sharing, we have to respect difference and diversity. We have to ensure that we respect, acknowledge and embrace that diversity in the provision of teaching and teacher training, but that can be done in a range of formats.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. It indicates to me that this is a fait accompli and that he will force things to move in line with the social engineering policy of the Alliance Party and against the wishes of the majority of MLAs in the House —

**11.15 am**

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to come to his question.

**Mr Flanagan:** — who wish St Mary's and Stranmillis to continue.

**Mr Speaker:** Ask a question on the statement.

**Mr Flanagan:** Does the Minister require the endorsement of the Minister of Education to move to the second stage? Has he sought any such endorsement yet?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his interesting comments. Let me reassure him that there is no predetermined outcome from this process. Like any Member, I come with my own views and reflect my party's views on a range of different aspects. That applies to every other Minister in the Assembly as well.

The Member should also not take it as read that everyone in the House has a particular view of what the future should hold. Members should be aware that the Programme for Government refers to the importance of developing shared education. Indeed, we had announcements in the past number of weeks from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on a number of measures for building a shared future, which include education. Some of us do not believe that that goes far enough, but, nevertheless, that is a direction of travel out there.

In my relations with the Minister of Education, I am careful to ensure that what I do reflects my particular responsibilities as the Minister for Employment and Learning. It is my responsibility to fund and resource the training colleges in Northern Ireland alongside the universities. It is my budget — solely my budget — funds them, although there were some recent transfers from the Department of Education for some new, additional initiatives. Therefore, it is for me to ensure that we are using resources efficiently.

There is a very clear difference of responsibility. The Minister of Education has sole responsibility for setting the ITE numbers for the

colleges. I may well have a view on the decisions that he makes, but I fully respect his right to make those decisions. In turn, it is for other Members to hold him to account for his decisions and to question him in that regard.

**Mr Rogers:** Thanks to the Minister for his statement. I particularly wish to look at the first paragraph on the third page of the statement. Minister, on the matter of costs, I am sure that you will agree that, for comparisons between institutions to be informative, we must compare like with like. If you take the cost structure of a BEd as opposed to a PGCE, you have only to look at the length of teaching practice as an example of difference. In the light of those comparisons, how useful is it to compare Queen's University and the University of Ulster, which offer postgraduate qualifications, with Stranmillis and St Mary's, which offer —

**Mr Speaker:** I encourage the Member to finish.

**Mr Rogers:** — undergraduate courses?

**Dr Farry:** I certainly understand the Member's point. Hopefully, the statement and the report, whenever the Member has the opportunity to read it, acknowledge that making comparisons is not an easy exercise. Nonetheless, I do not think that it is right simply to ignore the whole point about benchmarking. We have to benchmark what we do in Northern Ireland. We are the custodians of the public purse, so we have a responsibility to do that.

The conclusions that we are drawing are incredibly clear: in Northern Ireland, it is more expensive to train teachers in the two university colleges than it is in the universities; and it is much more expensive to train teachers in Northern Ireland than it is anywhere else in these islands. We are also seeing a much wider trend in these islands and further afield of moving away from small, specialist teacher education colleges to teacher education in universities. In arguing for the status quo, the Member is very much going against emerging best practice in the immediate vicinity of Northern Ireland and further afield.

**Mrs Overend:** Will the Minister inform the House whether he prefers high-quality graduate teachers to be trained at home in Northern Ireland, where they can benefit our economy and then enjoy the opportunity to work here or elsewhere, or for even more of our student teachers to be trained outside Northern Ireland and then apply to return to teach here without any trained understanding of the curriculum?

**Dr Farry:** People obviously have the freedom to study in Northern Ireland or elsewhere and to return and register locally to teach here. The argument will be made that if we were to restrict the numbers of places locally, people would simply opt to study elsewhere and still wish to come home. The Member probably does make a case that studying in Northern Ireland is perhaps slightly more beneficial, in that people are trained in the particular sensitivities and understanding of the education system locally. However, I return to the fundamental point that we need to ensure that we take into account the wider interests of the economy. We need to train world-class quality teachers for our local market. We must also ensure that we use our resources to train in other specialities that our economy also needs.

**Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** I thank the Minister for his statement, in which he refers to the issue of science, technology, engineering and mathematics — the STEM subjects. During its visit to the science park at the Titanic Quarter just last week, the Education Committee had presentations on that issue. Will he inform the House what proactive steps he will take, with the Minister of Education, to resolve the issue of the lack of teaching of STEM subjects?

Will the Minister also inform the House what the situation is regarding the appointment of the chair of the board of governors of Stranmillis? Will he unequivocally state to the House that he will ensure that Stranmillis is not treated as second class to any other institution in Northern Ireland?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his comments. First, my Department and the Department of Education, indeed John O'Dowd and I, collaborate closely around the issue of STEM subjects. We have a STEM strategy for Northern Ireland, and great effort is being made to encourage more of our students to engage with STEM subjects.

On the issue of Stranmillis: yes, I can give a commitment that we are treating Stranmillis fairly and objectively. We have not sought any additional savings or efficiencies from it that we have not sought from other institutions, in line with the wider thrust of the current comprehensive spending review within which the Executive and Assembly are living. So, absolutely.

On the issue of the chair of the board of governors: I am not sure if the Member picked it up, but we announced the appointment last

week of Professor Sir Des Rea as chair of the board of governors of Stranmillis. He is now in post and no doubt digesting the contents of the statement and the report. We now have a board of governors that is more or less at full strength with a newly appointed chair.

**Mr McElduff:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the report provide definitive answers on whether the current system of teacher training in the North offers best value for money, and whether the two university colleges are sustainable in light of the forecast need for teachers?

**Dr Farry:** First, the report is definitive in what it states about the future sustainability of the two university colleges, and we should not deny what the report is saying. The report is objective and factually based. It was done by independent consultants appointed on a competitive basis by the Department.

The demand model is a matter for which the Minister of Education is accountable to the Assembly; he makes those decisions. The viability of the two university colleges is very sensitive to changes, going forward. No doubt the Minister of Education will want to make his own announcement on that in the coming days, but I have been in discussions with him around all of that to find a means of providing the situation with some degree of short-term stability. However, the wider point still stands, which is that even a small drop in current ITE numbers would have immediate consequences for the viability of the two colleges.

**Lord Morrow:** The one thing that seems to be omitted in this fairly lengthy statement is any indication of an indicative timetable for anything to happen. Is this more aspirational than anything else? Designation of these as non-departmental bodies, I suspect, will make your job more difficult. However, is there any indication of any timing, dates or anything else around this?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his question and the relevant points that he made. I would like to appoint the person to lead the second stage of the review within the next number of weeks — certainly before the end of June — and for that person to be in post by September. There may well be a panel of people to support him or her.

I envisage that the process of engagement with the institutions and other stakeholders and the development of a number of options will take about six to eight months. Therefore, perhaps

this time next year we will have the outcome of that aspect of stage two. I will then want to have further discussions alongside my officials with the bodies to see what reforms we can find agreement on. This is very much dependent on what can happen through agreement, and we will see where that goes. If we were to come to some agreement on changes to the system, I envisage that those would perhaps commence from the academic year 2015-16.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas seo. Minister, the Committee for Employment and Learning published a report on teacher education in 2009. Do you agree with one of its main findings, namely that there is a need to take a long-term view of the sector and that value for money should be balanced with quality of provision?

**Dr Farry:** I certainly concur with the Member that we need to take a long-term view of that. The point I am making to the House this morning is that, in the long term, the current system is not sustainable. Even if we do nothing to change the current funding regimes and continue to pump in significant subsidies to the university colleges, in time they will become unsustainable, so doing nothing is really not a viable option.

As for what happened in the last Assembly, it is worth drawing attention to the decision to pump in additional non-ITE places to the university colleges. The main driver for doing that was to make the colleges viable. That was not driven by any analysis of the particular training and skills needs of our economy back then, or today. We have a situation in which over 30% of places at both the university colleges are not related to the training of teachers but are general academic degree opportunities. The primary purpose is to keep the colleges viable rather than to address the skills shortages of our economy.

**Mr Byrne:** Given that the Minister is going to appoint an international educational guru, what policy parameters is he setting for that post, considering that there is a big issue in Northern Ireland with the lack of literacy and numeracy among many adults? Will there be consideration of some change in the colleges away from liberal studies, childhood studies and health and leisure, and towards specialist training to address the numeracy and literacy deficiency?

**Dr Farry:** I thank the Member for his question. First, the content of the current non-ITE

provision at St Mary's and Stranmillis is a matter for those colleges to determine. The provision of liberal arts, leisure and early childhood studies are the result of decisions that they have taken to date. There is a wider issue about whether it is right that they have been able to diversify to that extent from initial teacher education, given that the primary motivation behind that was simply to make the colleges viable.

A greater focus on literacy and numeracy is probably a question that relates more to the actual teaching content that trainee teachers will receive in the institutions.

The content of the curriculum is a matter for the Minister of Education to take forward. No doubt, he will take note of the comments that have been made. My review concerns the funding and how we structure the system. Aspects related to teacher training numbers and what they are trained in fall within the purview of the Department of Education.

**Mr Allister:** Sadly, the Minister in office has never been a friend of Stranmillis University College. He sought to destroy it through merger based on flawed financial viability figures. Now this audit shows that both St Mary's and Stranmillis are financially viable for many years to come.

### 11.30 am

Why, instead of trying to put the colleges down, does he not seek to liberate them financially by getting rid of NDPB status so that they can enhance their income? Is he still committed to the consultation to end NDPB status, because, in answer to the Chairperson of the Committee, it did not sound like it?

**Dr Farry:** I thank Mr Allister for his questions. First, I am a friend of Stranmillis and have always been its friend. I think I might have been the first Minister to visit Stranmillis's board of governors in 90 years of the existence of the Northern Ireland state, which is an interesting state of affairs. I am not quite sure what happened under previous jurisdictions.

It is important to bear in mind that the issue of the merger between Stranmillis and Queen's University — it is interesting that Mr Allister is the first Member to refer to that — predates my time in office as Minister for Employment and Learning, was devised under the tenure of my immediate predecessors, and I inherited it when I took office. At that time, the working assumption was that the merger would

proceed. However, a lot of Members decided that they did not want to support it. I took the view that although I potentially wanted the merger to proceed, it was more important to have a more holistic review of teacher education in Northern Ireland rather than to focus on the merger of two particular institutions and, perhaps, lose sight of some of the wider issues.

It is also important to remember that the merger was requested unanimously by the then board of governors of Stranmillis. It was not something that I, or my predecessors when they first proposed it, sought to develop over the head of Stranmillis. It was driven by the Taylor report on Stranmillis and was taken forward by the Department.

We are committed to looking at the NDPB status of Stranmillis and St Mary's. It may happen at different paces in the different colleges, which reflects the fact that their governance arrangements are not the same. St Mary's has been reclassified as an NDPB, but that is being appealed with the assistance of DFP. I am quite happy to advance that appeal, but I have to report to the Member and the House that it is not going well. It is a difficult challenge to get the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to reverse that. One factor — among many that we need to be aware of — is the sheer scale of the public sector support of institutions, which is something that the ONS takes into account when it looks at classifications.

It is not simply a matter of our changing the governance arrangements in St Mary's or Stranmillis in appealing those decisions. The ONS will look at a wider range of issues, including the level of public funding, when it makes its decisions. Even if we go through a lot of hoops locally to try to assist the colleges in that regard, there is no guarantee of a successful outcome. Stranmillis has a different type of governance and is much more closely linked to the Department because of the nature of its public appointments. Members will know that, had we wanted to progress the merger of Queen's and Stranmillis, there would have been a need for secondary legislation in this House, and, again, that reflects the degree of tie-up with the public sector.

There are practical steps that we may be able to take in the short term. Those will give Stranmillis the flexibility around resources that will allow it to generate additional income short of moving ahead with the legislation that would be required to make a good case to ONS for reclassification. However, I imagine that we

would be in a position to make that case as part of the outcome of the review that I have announced today.

## **Primary Schools: Computer-based Assessments**

**Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A Cheann Comhairle, ba mhian liom ráiteas a dhéanamh faoi na chéad chéimeanna eile maidir le measúnuithe ríomhairebhunaithe i mbunscoileanna. I wish to make a statement on the next steps for the computer-based assessments in primary schools.

I will start by setting out the context in which the computer-based assessments (CBAs) were conducted last autumn, but I do so in the knowledge that the experience of many children and their teachers was unquestionably negative. I do not underestimate the impact of that, and I am determined that lessons will be learnt and that we do not have a rerun of this unacceptable experience.

The benefits of pupil assessment for diagnostic purposes are almost universally accepted by our schools. There are tremendous examples of good practice to be found throughout the North. Teachers want to know what their pupils can and cannot do to inform their teaching over the coming period. The statutory computer-based assessments were, and are, intended to deliver diagnostic assessments tailored to our curriculum to support our teachers and pupils. International evidence from the trends in international mathematics and science study (TIMSS) and the progress in international reading literacy study (PIRLS), for example, demonstrates how well our primary pupils are performing compared with those in other jurisdictions. That provides the rationale for developing an assessment tailored to our needs.

CBAs are not intended to be high-stake tests. They are assessment tools provided to inform teaching and learning. For that reason, data from CBAs is not collected or collated centrally. CBAs are intended to support assessment for learning rather than of learning. Assessment outcomes should provide teachers and parents with information on a pupil's strengths and areas for improvement.

Computer-based assessments provide greater flexibility than paper-based methods and have the potential to minimise the impact on teacher workloads. Common assessment also offers primary schools a consistent basis for assessment that is tied to our curriculum and



information on outcomes. A common tool that is used by all schools allows outcomes to be standardised against the population here and gives parents and teachers a view of how individual children are doing compared with others in the same education system. An adaptive computer-based assessment adjusts the sequence or difficulty of questions in line with a pupil's ability, which makes it easier for children to perform at their best. Since it is centrally procured, unlike commercially available assessments, computer-based assessments are free at the point of delivery.

The introduction of the new computer-based assessments in autumn 2012 presented significant challenges. Those challenges were faced by schools, and a significant number reported difficulties with the operation of the new assessments. If the Department makes it a legal requirement for schools to use an assessment, it places a requirement on the Department to ensure that it works. Clearly, that was not always the case last year. A policy that was intended to help and support teachers had the opposite effect in many cases.

I also recognise that changes enforced by procurement rules have created their own difficulties. With the five-year contract for the interactive computerised assessment system (InCAS) coming to an end, those rules required a competitive tendering process to be launched. Many school principals have told me that, just as they were getting used to the InCAS, it was withdrawn. That created difficulties for schools that benefit from continuity.

Of most concern were the experiences relayed to me directly by teachers about the pressure that they felt in administering the assessments and, in some cases, the distress felt by pupils when they faced technical difficulties. This is clearly not good enough, which is why I instigated reviews of the implementation and operation of NINA and NILA, the numeracy and literacy assessment packages.

What did not work? In short, a range of things. Alongside a specific set of technical difficulties, user experience was often reported as poor, and there were real issues for teachers with the ease of set-up and compatibility of hardware. The reports that I commissioned have identified several things that could have been done better.

A review by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on the operation of the new assessments reported widespread dissatisfaction, with many questioning the link between assessment

outcomes and their own professional judgement. An Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) review that looked at how effectively schools make use of this assessment information broadly echoes those findings.

An independent gateway review identified a number of factors that contributed to last year's difficulties: the impact of the procurement process; poor communication amongst the delivery partners; the restricted timescale for adequate testing; the lack of appropriate authority and technical expertise in the project team taking forward implementation; the absence of end-to-end load testing across the C2k network; and difficulties with hardware and software set-up in schools.

The gateway review report made 10 recommendations, which my Department has accepted. However, I also felt that it was important to widen the scope of the reviews to look beyond last year's difficulties and ensure that CBA legislation and policy continue to support good practice in schools and my wider policy agenda.

Since the making of the 2007 regulations, which made the use of computer-based assessment a statutory requirement, my Department's policy agenda has moved forward considerably. Statutory CBA must now be seen in the context of a range of policies. We have Count, Read: Succeed, which is central to the development of literacy and numeracy throughout post-primary learning.

Tá Gach Scoil ina Scoil Mhaith againn, rud a aithníonn ról tábhachtach na múinteoirí i seachadadh torthaí oideachais ardchaighdeáin do gach uile dhalta. We have Every School a Good School, which recognises the essential role played by our teachers in delivering high-quality educational outcomes for all our pupils. Of particular importance is the increase in our focus on the needs, aptitudes and aspirations of all our children through, for example, the special educational needs (SEN) review and the review of Irish-medium education.

A common theme across my policy agenda is the importance of using assessment data in helping to improve outcomes for young people, particularly in closing the gap between the highest and lowest achievers. That includes promoting and strengthening parental involvement in a child's education. Effective use of CBA data by schools is intended to support that wider strategy. I therefore commissioned a fourth review of CBA policy by the Department to determine whether the policy

continues to support my Department's wider objectives.

That policy review of statutory CBA held 10 workshops, with every primary school invited to participate. The consultation found that, almost without exception, school principals accept and support the need for diagnostic assessment but wish it to be supported in a more flexible way than the current CBA legislation allows.

Although engagement with school leaders on medium- and long-term options for the way forward has been extremely constructive, I have been informed that a key message at each of the workshops has been the need for communication from the Department of Education on what is happening in the coming term to allow schools to plan and prepare.

To address that concern, I am announcing the arrangements for computer-based assessment in 2013 earlier than I had originally indicated. On the basis of the findings from the reviews that I detailed, and, most importantly, in recognition of the concerns expressed by schools, I have decided that the Department will not specify the literacy and numeracy assessments — NINA and NILA — for mandatory use in the forthcoming term.

There will be no legislative requirement on schools to assess pupils for diagnostic purposes using CBA or any other assessment or to update parents with diagnostic assessment results in the autumn term. However, I know that schools value diagnostic assessment early in the year and plan to conduct assessments voluntarily, using a range of tools. Consequently, I expect diagnostic assessment to take place in a form that is convenient for schools, and that information will feed into engagement with parents. The NINA and NILA assessments remain unique: they are designed to reflect our curriculum and are standardised against our pupils. I accept that there were major issues last year, and I have said many times how unacceptable that was, but it would be a real shame and a missed opportunity if those bad experiences led us to losing that potential.

There is continued benefit for schools in using bespoke assessments, and for that reason, NILA and NINA will be available to schools on a voluntary basis. As was planned from the outset, NINA and NILA will continue to evolve. I am informed by CCEA that it has listened to schools' concerns on the operation and outcomes of those assessments and that significant improvements have been made, for example, to their usability and reporting.

One of the first things I will be seeking later in the year is feedback from schools on the extent to which CCEA has listened and the extent to which real improvements have been delivered. The voluntary use of those assessments on a pilot basis will generate lessons for future policy and practice. My Department will contact primary schools over the next few days with more details on how that pilot will operate and will seek nominees for participation.

Although I am not specifying an assessment for use in 2013, the CBA legislation will remain in place until we repeal it or amend it. In moving forward, I am determined to recognise and learn from the mistakes of the past and not to replicate them. I recognise, for example, the importance of sound public procurement requirements, but they should not be allowed to override sound educational policy and practice in our schools. Even more importantly, rather than developing an assessment policy for schools, I am committed to my Department working with them.

#### 11.45 am

The independent gateway review team had a specific task and did an excellent job with the time and resources available to it. In making arrangements for next year's pilot, I have tasked my officials to take forward each of the recommendations in the final report. However, I believe that a more detailed analysis of the two- to three-year period of CBA development and implementation is needed. It is clear to me that there are lessons to be learned from policy development through to implementation. Members may also wish to note that my Department has provided key documentation to the Audit Office for its information.

In conclusion, I will make a more detailed announcement on the way forward on the further review on CBA policy later this year, and, of course, changes to the legislation, if any, will be subject to public consultation. Mar fhocal scoir, bheinn sásta uasdátú a thabhairt don Tionól i ndiaidh an phróisis seo. I will be happy to update the Assembly following that process.

**Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education):** I thank the Minister for coming to the House today. The computer-based assessments have been the subject of considerable anxiety for the Committee and schools since the autumn.

When as yet unresolved technical issues were reported by many schools, they were initially completely and absolutely disputed by the Department. The lack of access for deaf children was not satisfactorily addressed, and the nature and lack of utility of the results generated by NILAs and NINAs was inexplicable.

However, the most striking aspect of this debacle is not the technical failures, the £900,000 of public money spent in the first year, or the time and energy that schools have had to waste on trying to make the tests work. It is not even the stress and anxiety that the tests have caused many of our primary schools. I suggest that the key to the mystery is the Department and the Minister's abject failure to listen to schools. We could say, "So what?", but we are in a very serious situation. We have gone through this whole process, and the Minister has had to come to the House today, despite telling us on 6 November 2012:

*"we do not have wide-scale problems with the computer-based assessments; we do not have a shambles; we do not have a crisis." — [Official Report, Vol 79, No 2, p11, col 1].*

It does not sound like it this morning.

The Education Committee did listen to schools. We wrote to the schools that the Department had identified as having no trouble with computer-based assessment, and a number of them told us that, in truth, the reverse was the case. We listened to primary school principals who told us of non-Irish-speaking children who inexplicably managed to score extraordinarily well in the Irish-language version of NILAs. The Committee also heard from other school principals who claimed that they had been threatened with a visit from the Education and Training Inspectorate if they complained about CBAs.

Will the Minister today explain to the House why it took him so long to press the delete button on computer-based assessment? Will he also confirm what arrangements he will now put in place to deal with the procurement issue? Procurement is at the heart of the problems that led to a situation in which InCAS was brought to an end, NILAS and NINAS were introduced and the process is the shambles that it is today.

**Mr O'Dowd:** The Member has produced a question that was nearly as long as my statement. It will be quite difficult to respond to all his points, but I have taken note of a number of them.

At no time did the Department dispute that there were technical difficulties with the programme. Once the programme was rolled out in September, my Department and CCEA started getting reports of problems. Within weeks, I issued to all schools a letter saying that, if they were having technical difficulties with the programme, they should set it aside and not cause further stress to pupils or staff. That was done.

I called together all the main players in the programme within weeks of the first reports of problems. I sat them down and told them straight that the issue needed to be resolved, that they needed to start working with the schools and that they needed to get the problems under control. That work was carried out, and there was an improvement in the service after that. At that time, I committed to carrying out a number of reviews. I am reporting back on those reviews, which are evidence-based reviews. They are, quite rightly, critical of how this programme of work was rolled out by the main players.

The Member said that the Department failed to listen to schools. That is partially true, but it is partially true across a number of delivery agencies. As Minister in charge of the Department, I have to take a certain amount of responsibility for that. I assure you now, Chair, that no one in my Department, and no one in CCEA or any of the other delivery agencies involved in this, are under any illusions about who they should be listening to. They should be listening to the schools, and they should be learning from the experiences around this. As I said in my statement, the next programme of work that is rolled out in respect of this will be based on the experiences of schools in the first place.

I do not accept that we disputed with schools, either at the Education Committee or anywhere else, about what happened in this case. The Member said that a number of schools were threatened with a visit from the training inspectorate. Provide me with a list of schools that were threatened with a visit from anyone, and I will look into that matter personally. It is not how my Department works, and it is not how the training inspectorate works. If any school believes that it was threatened, I would personally like to look into that matter.

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement, which, as outlined by the Minister, demonstrates definitive and swift action. When the review took place, he said quite publicly that, if NINA and NILA

were found to be not fit for purpose, the delete button, in the words of the Chair, would be hit. That is exactly what we are seeing here today, so I welcome such swift action. In the light of this decision, what lessons can be learnt?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I said to the Chair of the Committee, listening to people is a good lesson to learn. If the experiences of the schools had been listened to during the pilot programme, I do not think that we would have been as far down the road with this difficulty as we are.

One of the key findings from the gateway review, as it states quite clearly, is that the problem started with the procurement process. That is where the problems first started and it is where they were embedded in the process. The procurement process, for whatever reason, was delayed. It caused a time frame that did not allow for full testing of the system to be resolved.

I want further enquiries into how the specification was drawn up. I want the communications between the main providers in this programme, C2k and the delivery partners, to be further investigated. I want to ensure that, in two or three years' time, we do not again run into a procurement deadline instead of an education policy. I want the education policy to take precedence over it all.

So, several lessons are to be learnt. I am happy to share my reports with the Education Committee on this, and, as I said, I want to bring in a further independent review to burrow down into this further to ensure that all lessons have been learnt.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Minister for his statement. I welcome the statement, and I also welcome the fact that the Department is holding its hands up to having got this wrong. It is increasingly frustrating that a pilot was carried out last year and a report produced that was looked at. I believe that NINA and NILA are fatally flawed. As we move on, will the Department now work with all schools that use bespoke assessments, including NINA and NILA and others, to ensure that, in the future, we have an effective assessment-for-learning tool in our schools?

**Mr O'Dowd:** This is not an attempt to pass the buck, but it is not the sole responsibility of my Department. Perhaps, as Minister, it is my sole responsibility, but CCEA is the responsible body for the delivery of this programme. I have spoken to the current chair of CCEA and expressed my frustrations to him about how this

was dealt with. He is going away to study the reports again to ensure that all lessons have been learnt by CCEA in moving this forward. I have further work to do in my Department, and, as I said, I am bringing forward an independent review.

A number of schools use bespoke assessments, and I want to talk to schools about those. I want to see whether those systems can be adopted to the curriculum. They are commercial entities, so, if we are going to go out, I cannot say that that is the commercial identity that we should use, because we would run into the procurement problem again.

If schools use those, they pay for them out of their own resources. That is how the system currently works.

Let us look at the computer-based assessment policy and how it was delivered. An integral part of that will be talking to schools about their needs, what systems they used in the past and what their experiences of those systems were. That will be part of drawing up the new specification. Schools will play an integral part in drawing up the new policy.

**Mr Kinahan:** I welcome the statement. Last year, it should not have been a case of hitting the delete button but of sticking it in the trash. I very much welcome the changes that the Minister is bringing forward. Last year, we had indications that the pilot was not working as far as the assessment was concerned. Will the Minister ensure that, this time, enough time is provided, that parents, pupils and teachers are all very much part of it, and that we all learn together?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question. Last September, October and November, when we were working through this issue, I was not in a position to hit the delete button for several reasons. We had to garner the evidence. We did react to the schools, and I issued a letter within weeks of the problems being identified, as I said to the Chair, asking them to set aside the assessments if they were causing difficulties. The situation improved over time, and around 90% of our schools completed the assessments. A significant proportion of those that completed the assessments still experienced difficulties, so I am not using that figure as a justification or in admiration of the system.

I can only reassure Members that one of the key lessons that has to be learnt from the

computer-based assessment is that schools should have been listened to during the pilot scheme. One of the difficulties identified by the gateway review was the skills base within the management team that was looking after the scheme. The team may not have understood the technical difficulties that were identified by the schools or how far-reaching those difficulties would be. Furthermore, the lack of communication between CCEA and those responsible for the delivery of NINA, NILA and C2k is a matter of concern for me. I also have to look at the communication between those four bodies and my Department, and vice versa. I am bringing in an independent body to look at that.

**Mr Lunn:** I also welcome the statement. Since we are all using computer terminology, I suggest that the recycle bin could come into play. The Minister has taken a sensible decision to take the pressure off this year. It seems strange, all the same, that we will end up with no statutory requirement for a year. Does the Minister envisage a situation in which there may be a statutory provision requiring schools to conduct an assessment process in the autumn term each year, but that there may be more than one option and no mandatory system?

**Mr O'Dowd:** There is one button that a computer does not have and that is a common-sense button. Sometimes, common sense is the best way forward on a lot of these issues.

I think that there is still value in a common system being used across all schools — a system that works, delivers the outcomes and information that teachers and parents require, and facilitates a child's enjoyment of learning. That is the system that we require, and we have not yet reached that point. As we review the policy and how it is implemented, all these questions can be further debated and, indeed, answered. I am still in favour of a common assessment programme across the board that reflects our curriculum and puts the assessment information back into the system.

**Ms Boyle:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. What assurances will be given to those in mainstream schools who are visually impaired or have hearing difficulties that future tests will be suitable for them? Will there be consultation with teachers of pupils who are visually impaired or have hearing difficulties in mainstream schools?

**Mr O'Dowd:** One of the themes that came through as the programme was rolled out was the difficulties faced by the visually impaired and those with hearing difficulties. The schemes were not matching their requirements. That is totally unacceptable.

Any new system that is put in place will have to be equality proofed to ensure that it meets the needs of all our pupils, especially those with learning difficulties, whether that be due to visual impairment or hearing difficulties. All our schools will be invited to take part in the discussions on how we move forward from here, and how we bring forward a system that meets the needs of all our pupils. I assure the Member that the pupils she refers to, those who have hearing and visual difficulties, and their teachers, will be central to those discussions.

## 12.00 noon

**Mr Byrne:** Like other Members, I welcome the Minister's statement, and it is good that he has withdrawn the compulsory CBA. What policy advice was the Minister given before it was introduced? What advice has he for parents who feel that their children who went through the CBA had a bad experience and that damage has been done?

**Mr O'Dowd:** The policy advice I was given was that we had reached the procurement deadline. The procurement process had been gone through, and I was presented with the winners of a tender process whose bid had met the specifications of that process. I signed off on that. An independent review will look at how that policy advice was collated, whether it was accurate and whether I was right to sign off on it.

I have no doubt that there was upset among pupils in a number of schools as they went through the computer-based assessment. However, I do not believe that any long-term damage was done. This should never have happened, but I do not think that, given the nature of the assessments, the professionalism of the teaching staff in our schools, etc, long-term damage was done to a child's ability to learn.

However, we should not present a child with a tool which does not allow it to enjoy learning. Learning has to be about enjoyment. The child has to enjoy it to get the benefits of it and become interested in it. Even if it were short-term, or whatever it may have been, it should never have happened in the first place.

**Mrs Dobson:** Minister, I suggest that, rather than hit the delete button, you would prefer to use the escape one. How can you restore confidence among teachers and parents, following this morning's statement, that computer-based assessments will work in all schools without the utter chaos and disruption for pupils that occurred last year?

**Mr O'Dowd:** As I said, I have set aside the mandatory nature of the computer-based assessments, the NINAs and NILAs. I hope that a significant number of schools participate in the pilot scheme. Through the pilot scheme, we continue to learn lessons that allow us to develop a better policy for the future. A number of schools use their own assessment tools which are commercially available, and those schools purchase them from their own resources. If schools wish to continue to do that, so be it.

However, an interesting thing came out of the workshops. There was widespread agreement, with the odd exception, that, as a general principle, computer-based assessments are a useful tool for teachers. Let us not throw the baby out with the bath water in these circumstances. Let us move to a point where the Department provides a usable, efficient and effective tool to give to schools, rather than the experience that schools went through last year.

**Mr Speaker:** Members, that concludes questions on the ministerial statement. I ask the House to take its ease as we move into the Final Stage —  
Sorry. I call Jim Allister.

**Mr Allister:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I welcome the U-turn on mandatory computer assessments. Can the Minister tell us how much this debacle has cost and will cost? Is the commitment to pilot schemes because of contractual obligations? Given that, thankfully, he now acknowledges that teachers should be able to use that which is convenient and suitable to them, will he fund the purchase of standardised tests, which many schools have been using and have had to fund themselves up to now?

**Mr O'Dowd:** I thank the Member for his question. The system set-up, including procurement and all the associated issues, cost around £900,000. Next year, the cost of running the system would be somewhere in the region of £300,000. I would much prefer to have seen that system running, if it were running properly, all schools were using it, etc.

However, we are involved in contractual obligations with the providers, and, if we were to seek buyout of those contractual obligations ahead of the end of the contract, I am advised that there may be significant further costs to it. I have to say that I have not approached this from a financial position; but I have not disregarded the financial situation, because it is quite serious in this matter. However, I think that the best way to approach it at this stage is to look at the needs of our education system and the needs of our pupils.

The Member asked whether I will fund the resources for the use of other commercially available computer-based assessments. I will take that under consideration. I suspect that there may be some difficulties around procurement and contractual obligations, etc, but I will discuss that matter further with my officials to see whether we can facilitate such requests if they come in.

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

## **Executive Committee Business**

### **Marine Bill: Final Stage**

**Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):** I beg to move

*That the Marine Bill [NIA 5/11-15] do now pass.*

I am pleased, as I am sure we all are, to have reached Final Stage. As Members well know, the legislation will enable us to manage activities in the marine environment so that we can get more benefit from its use and provide better protection for our rich natural heritage. This is defining legislation in our domestic law: it defines how we will better manage that part of the marine environment that falls to our responsibility, both for marine planning and marine conservation.

Quite a number of people from schools in Northern Ireland are watching down on us in the Chamber today. My strong sense is that, whether it is on issues around our seas and the marine environment, or whether it is issues around our land and our natural heritage, the younger generation has a much greater appreciation of all those wonderful assets and the need to keep them clean, protect their quality and positively develop them for its generation and future generations than, perhaps, my generation would have had. That is my very strong sense from visiting schools, especially through the Eco-Schools programme. We have a responsibility to the generation looking down on us today to get the Bill right.

Before talking briefly about some of the content of the Bill, I again acknowledge all the people who contributed to getting it to Final Stage. First, I acknowledge my predecessors in the Department of the Environment (DOE). Before I took up my responsibility, there were a number of predecessors in DOE who initiated and led the consultation and processes around the Bill before First Stage.

Secondly, I acknowledge the work of the Committee; it did the heavy lifting with the content of the Bill, the interrogation of the draft clauses and the bringing forward of new clauses. I also thank all the other contributors: DOE staff; Assembly staff; the Office of the Legislative Counsel; the Attorney General; my Executive colleagues; and, in particular, the

marine stakeholders who were very much in the vanguard of support for marine legislation, even though it might not be all that they wanted.

As I said, the Committee, in particular, undertook the detailed scrutiny of the Bill. The recommendations in the Committee's report and the Committee's further scrutiny following publication of the report led to positive amendments at Consideration Stage. The Bill is better than it was at Second Reading because of the work undertaken at Third Reading, even though it is not all that some wanted in the processes around fourth and fifth reading. I thank Members for their helpful contributions. As I said, not everything that everyone wanted to be in the Bill is in the Bill, although, as we know, events conspired to see the sustainable development duty put into the Bill, which is a fine achievement by its proposer, Anna Lo. However, in the round, I believe that the Bill provides a sound, practical and balanced approach for the future.

The Bill will further our aim of having clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse oceans and seas. It will introduce a strategic and holistic approach to the management and protection of marine waters, based on the principles of sustainable development. That should be the approach going forward, and it needs input from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of the Environment, given that DARD has responsibility for the marine environment and its fishing function.

As we go forward with the Bill and the management of the sea and the land, the relationship between DARD and the DOE will become more critical. It may be that, by the end of next week, the European Union will have signed off on the CAP review and the budget line for agriculture. If DARD and the DOE do not work intimately together in managing that process and taking forward our shared priorities action framework, we will not serve the interests of all our people, including our farmers, to the maximum.

The new marine plan, which is a big part of the Bill, will assist in the achievement of sustainable levels of economic and social activity through the adoption of a more strategic approach. It will be based on a balanced consideration of economic, social and environmental factors, while taking account of the costs and benefits of marine activities. The marine plan development process will encourage broad public participation in addition to the involvement of

local communities, marine industries, councils, interest groups and others.

The fact that we had a consultation on the statement of public participation is representative, in my view, of how the Bill has been managed heretofore and how the process must be managed hereafter to build in a deeply inclusive participative process to ensure that all sectors and interests bring their views to the table so that, on the far side of that discussion, we have a marine plan that measures up to the needs of our marine and all those who have an interest in the marine environment.

Previously, the key reforms to marine licensing have been introduced through the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. However, the Marine Bill will allow for further streamlining of marine licensing and generating concepts. The Department is taking forward that principle through proposals that are being worked up for better regulation generally, whereby, on the far side of the Bill, integrated permits and integrated enforcement will be a better way to manage issues that fall to environmental regulation.

Under European law, we have responsibility to designate areas in our seas to protect certain species and habitats considered to be of conservation importance at a European level. That is clearly important. The Bill adds to the range of designations and contains provisions to protect nationally important species and habitats through marine conservation zones (MCZs). Those MCZs will be flexible in their level of protection. That will be determined by using sound scientific evidence on a site-by-site basis, which will allow for a range of management measures to be applied as necessary from a few minimal restrictions to areas with strict protection measures in which no activities will be permitted.

People know about the experience in Strangford lough and the requirement to establish a no-fish zone in the middle portion of the lough.

That may be appropriate in other places, but it may also be appropriate where MCZ designation arises and we have minimal protections on even a seasonal basis rather than across the year.

### 12.15 pm

Sites for MCZ designation will be selected following discussion and consultation with stakeholders representing all who use and

enjoy the marine environment. The marine conservation provisions will ensure that there is space for biodiversity and nature conservation measures, and they place biodiversity commitments at the heart of planning regulation and management. That is the essence of the Bill, how the Bill should be judged and how we should be judged.

**Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment):** On behalf of the Environment Committee, I welcome the Final Stage of the Marine Bill. As is traditional at Final Stage, on behalf of the Committee, I thank the departmental officials and the Minister for the close working relationship that we maintained throughout the passage of the Bill. That helped to ensure that the Committee scrutinised the Bill thoroughly and was able to come to agreement with the Department on proposed amendments.

I thank the Committee staff who worked on the legislation and the stakeholders who responded to the Committee's call for evidence, particularly the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) and the Anglo North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation (ANIFPO). We had to go back to them a few times to seek further information and opinion, but they were always quick to reply and helped to inform the Committee's deliberations.

This is important legislation. We are the last part of the UK to implement a marine Bill, so this will bring us into line with our UK counterparts and ensure greater protection of our marine environment. It will also go a long way to ensuring that our EU obligations are met, particularly the wild birds directive.

The Committee's scrutiny of the Bill led to recommendations for amendments. I welcome the Minister's agreement to those amendments, as I believe that they make the Bill stronger. On behalf of the Committee, I am, therefore, pleased to support the Bill.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would now like to say a few words in my capacity as MLA for South Belfast. First, I want to express how much I enjoyed the Consideration Stage debate two weeks ago, not just because my amendment on sustainable development was passed — more on that later — but because the nature of the debate was as it should be. Far too often, the Chamber witnesses the defensive or aggressive side of politics. Although there were varying opinions on what was most important in the Bill, I felt that, ultimately, we were united in achieving the best protection for the marine environment.



The Bill is not perfect, and the Alliance Party still has concerns, notably about the absence of an independent marine management organisation (MMO). I hope that the Minister will continue to work to gain Executive agreement on that. We maintain that an MMO would undoubtedly have strengthened the Bill, but we accept the preference of the House for the Department's amendment creating a new clause on arrangements to promote the co-ordination of functions between Departments. I remain sceptical, though, about the effectiveness of that proposal and would have liked more concrete steps put in place.

I was disappointed to miss Further Consideration Stage last week as I was away on Committee business in Dublin, where I attended a meeting for chairs of EU environment and energy committees. I understand that Simon Hamilton, who is smiling, revealed to the Chamber that I told him I was so happy when my amendment passed that I could have kissed him. I probably could have kissed many of my Committee members at that stage. That is true, Mr Deputy Speaker; I was that happy.

The Marine Bill addresses environmental protection, but now we have an overarching core aim of achieving the sustainable development of our seas. I view that as being extremely positive and thank all the parties for supporting it.

**Mr Hamilton:** I note that the Chair said that she "could" have kissed me. As passionate as she was about marine management protection and looking after the marine environment, it was only "could" have kissed: she was not sufficiently motivated to actually do it. Even she could not go that far.

I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill and the fact that it will soon pass into law. A long, laborious process got us to this stage. It was a year ago, as we have said at other stages of the debate, that we, as a Committee, started to consider this piece of legislation, and many of us have had to completely refresh our understanding and knowledge of the Bill in the past number of weeks and months.

However, if there is one advantage to the fact that it has taken so long, it is that the Committee's understanding of the finer points of the Bill is much better now than it was a year ago. The delay in getting the Bill to Consideration Stage gave us a lot of opportunities to look at other issues, which, perhaps, we had unfairly skirted round under

the time pressures of Committee Stage, and we were able to bring forward some amendments, including the amendment on displacement, which has passed into the Bill and will become law.

I said before, at various stages, that the Bill was very much about balance. It is not what every interest group associated with the marine environment would want or desire, but it is a good balance of those interests. I am glad that a piece of draft legislation, some aspects of which some within the fishing community, which, of course, I have an interest in as a constituency representative for the fishing village of Portavogie, had concerns about, now has the displacement amendment. The interests of the shooting fraternity, and concerns about how the Bill would impinge upon them, have been addressed by the inclusion of the word "cultural". Their interests, as well as those of the fishing community and those involved in energy, and all interests, now have to be considered in the designation of MCZs. It is now a "must" rather than a "may", and I think that that is a strengthening of the legislation and helps balance out some problems that were perceived to exist.

As a result, we look forward to moving towards the designation of marine conservation zones. I know that there is an imperative to designate Strangford lough as the first MCZ in Northern Ireland. I reiterate to the Minister, as others have done, the need to ensure that the process of designating marine conservation zones is done openly and transparently, and in a way that considers all the various interests. Furthermore, there must be a balance between those interests. As important as environmental and marine protection is, other human interests must not be forgotten about as we designate MCZs, moving forward.

The Chairman touched on marine management. I will not get into the debate, again, that was had about the best form of marine management. We now have the mechanism that has been put there. Although it is undesirable, in the view of many, we have the mechanism that is there. Even though it is not, perhaps, what everyone wanted, I hope that it at least affords those in government the opportunity to learn from the lessons of the past, primarily those that have been learned in Strangford lough, which are that we need co-ordination and co-operation across public authorities if we are to protect our marine environment in the way that we want it to be done.

I welcome the Final Stage of the Bill, and I look forward to it becoming law in the coming weeks.

**Mr Boylan:** Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Beidh mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar na céime deireanaí den Bhille seo. I want to speak in favour of the Bill at Final Stage. I will not comment on what the Chair and Deputy Chair would like to get up to while walking on the beach some night. I am glad that the hugs and kisses are over at this stage.

Unlike the Chairperson, I actually welcome the Bill. As they say in my native language, *tús maith leath na hoibre*. That means, "A good start is half the work." Any legislation on the marine environment is to be welcomed. Legislation brings new opportunities, new practices and best practices, which I would like to see protect and enhance the marine environment.

However, I would like to raise an issue with the Minister. The opposite end of bringing forward new, good and advantageous legislation on the marine environment is enforcement, fines, and all of that. Now that we have worked with stakeholders, it is vital that the message also gets out clearly to the public. There needs to be work and engagement with the public in order to get the message across about how they can contribute to developing, protecting and enhancing the marine environment. Perhaps the Minister would touch a wee bit on how he will engage with the public in moving forward on all of that.

Throughout the passage of the legislation, the major issue for me has always been the designation of MCZs. We look forward to working on that, but I reiterate the point that that work has to be evidence based. All the key stakeholders who need to play a role, including the public, need to be engaged with and informed. I would like the resources to be made available to support an evidence-based approach to protecting the marine environment.

I also want to put on record my thanks to all those who were involved with the Bill, including the Committee, its staff, and the previous Clerk to the Committee, Alex McGarel. I put on record my thanks for the work that she did to progress the Bill and support the Committee's work.

Finally, I ask the Minister what the time frames will be for subsequent legislation. Can he touch on what will come next and the time frames for all of that? With that in mind, I support the Bill.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I wish to be associated with the comments of other contributors in congratulating the Committee staff and, indeed, all those who contributed to this legislation. As others have pointed out, there is greater clarity due to the wide stakeholder engagement in which the Committee was involved. I hope that, by bringing greater clarity to the protection of our seas through the legislation — in particular, through the mainstreaming of marine licensing and the generation of consents — we will enable greater hydropower resources to be made available to the people of this island and, hopefully, further afield.

The Minister has pointed out on many occasions that there are great opportunities in recyclable and renewable energy resources on this island. The Marine Bill will give greater clarity to those who might be interested in pursuing such industry on this island. The clauses that seek to protect the natural environment and, indeed, improve biodiversity in the marine environment are also important.

I do not want to detain the House by reiterating much of what has already been said. I commend the Bill. In particular, I commend the Minister, who keeps the Committee quite busy in the scrutiny of legislation and compares very favourably with other Departments.

**Mr Elliott:** I, too, welcome the Bill's progression to this stage and add my thanks not only to the Minister but to the Department and Committee officials.

It is quite interesting that, as Mr Hamilton explained, it has taken us so long to get to this position. However, as he indicated, perhaps that is a good thing. I do not think that, just because we have got here, it means the end of marine management, and I am not talking about the marine management organisation. In fact, it is probably only the beginning. This at least sets the context and basis for progression, and that is good. When we get into the designation of MCZs and protected areas, there will clearly be much debate, perhaps even more than there was about the Bill itself.

### 12.30 pm

The one thing that I would ask, or implore the Minister to ensure, is that no organisation or group of individuals be excluded from the process, because I do not want to go back to the stage where some people on the economic or, indeed, the social side of things are left out of consultations and discussions. It is important that everyone is included. I suppose that that

was my one concern as we moved through the process — that the Marine Task Force did not include anybody from the fishing industry, which is one of the most relevant industries to the seas and could, therefore, have provided a lot of expertise. I am sure that that will be resolved and that those issues will be taken forward in a positive vein. However, I am just putting down that marker at this stage — I do not want to see any exclusion.

**Mr Attwood:** I thank all those who contributed to this debate and the way they contributed throughout the entire passage of the Bill. I want to capture some of the remarks made.

There are a lot of people in and around, for example, the Marine Task Force and the Anglo-Irish Fish Producers' Organisation, and if you put them in a room —

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Attwood:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** It is either the Anglo North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation or the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation. I think that only Ms Lo has got it right so far this morning.

**Mr Attwood:** That is obviously a comment directed not just at me but at Mr Hamilton, as he also called it the Anglo-Irish Fish Producers' Organisation. That may or may not be the case in the fullness of time, Mr Wells.

The point is that if you bring people from those organisations together, you will have a better outcome. Somebody is coming to this part of the world at the weekend — it is a private visit, so I will not name him, but he is an enormously successful businessperson and an enormous friend of Belfast and Northern Ireland — who provided a very simple but telling insight into the human condition when I spoke to him in Boston about 15 years ago. In that moment of great simplicity and great truth, he said that when you bring good people together, good things happen. I have always remembered that very simple philosophy and approach to life. I think that that also applies in other aspects of life, including how to manage our seas.

There are so many good people involved in the marine environment who have very different interests; nonetheless, my sense of those individuals — and I could name them — is that if you brought them together, you would have good outcomes. That is my response to Mr Elliott's point. The measure of all this work around the marine plan and MCZs heretofore is

deepened inclusion, which will mitigate the impact of difference, with the result that you will come to a good outcome. I think that some of the people to whom Mr Elliott may have been referring are of the character that, when they are in the room with everybody else, they will come to the right outcome.

We are the last part of Britain and Northern Ireland to have a Marine Bill. We may be last, but we can be first when it comes to managing our marine environment going forward. That will be the measure of government and the Department into the future.

Anna Lo knows about my ambition to have an MMO. We will not give up on developing the business case or making the argument to the Executive that, in the fullness of time, that is the most appropriate model to manage our marine environment.

Anna Lo and Simon Hamilton referred to the need for co-ordination of functions between Departments. Anna Lo indicated that she continued to have doubts about whether that threshold is required in law. In real time, in the real world, and this refers to my earlier comments, the issue of co-ordination between Departments, and between DARD and DOE in particular, will be tested and will have to be proven.

I say that because, if there is a Budget deal in respect of CAP, and given the requirement of the European Commission that 40% of that money has to be spent on countryside management, and given the opportunities that will be provided by regionalisation on one hand and by the priorities action framework on the other, if that does not work itself through in a wise and mature way around how DARD and DOE work together to the maximum in order to benefit the land and benefit our farmers, active and non-active farmers, we will not prove the challenge of co-ordination of function between, for example, DARD and DOE. I have to say that, from what I understand from government officials, there is, like no time before, an embedded understanding between DARD and DOE about how to take those things forward.

I very much travel in hope that because of some bitter experience around marine issues, acutely around Strangford lough, the ambition at a political and departmental level to have the co-ordination of functions for the marine environment and in respect of land generally will be tested and will be proven long in advance of the marine plan being adopted and the marine conservation zones being designated.

As Mr Hamilton outlined, we have had this difficult experience around Strangford lough; therefore, as we work through this process, I think the shadow of Strangford lough will be around it in that we were very close to infraction, we were very close to a very heavy financial penalty and we were on the wrong side of very severe damage to the marine environment and the modiolus modiolus in particular in Strangford lough. That should be a warning to us all, but as I indicated in previous contributions at other stages of the Bill, on the far side of all of this, Strangford lough should be designated an MCZ. The second MCZ should be that area of water identified by fishermen that is an incubator for crab and lobsters because of the ecosystem that lies on the seabed in and around Rathlin Island. That demonstrates that there is a new awareness of what we need to do and that we will be able to do it.

Mr Boylan is quite right: we have to get the message across. However, if there is a message that I try to put across, it is that the protection of our heritage is very much part of the character of our lives. Its positive development, which you can do through marine plans, MCZs, and so forth, is very much part of the future ambition of government, but you have to be relentless about it. That is why the Department has had these good beach summits that deal with marine issues and that is why we are going to have a heritage-led development summit in the next few weeks to profile even more how heritage in all its expressions, including the natural heritage, can have a role in driving forward opportunities into the future.

We need to have the best science, as indicated at Further Consideration Stage. The work done in the 1980s by the museum, the 'State of the Seas Report' in 2011, the ongoing research and science conducted by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency since 2006 and the new budget line that will have to exist to take forward new science will be very important so that we have exhaustive science or the best science for MCZ designation.

**Mr Wells:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Attwood:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** The Minister recently sent me a written answer that showed that it became legal to have an area of special scientific interest (ASSI) designation in Northern Ireland in 1985. Twenty-eight years later, we still have not

reached the stage of coming anywhere near complete designation. In GB, the equivalent legislation was the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. GB had all its designations completed within 15 years.

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** I remind the Member that this is the Marine Bill.

**Mr Wells:** Moving on to the Marine Bill — *[Laughter.]* — what confidence can Members have that the designation of marine conservation zones, as outlined in the Marine Bill, will not be equally as slow? Will the Minister give us a time frame as to when we can expect the first designation? If the history is anything to go by, even I could be retired from the Building before they are designated.

**Mr Attwood:** I think that most of us anticipate that you will never retire from the Building, given that you are the father, the grandfather, and no doubt will end up being the great-grandfather, of the House. Unless the DUP intends to deselect you in the next election or something like that, I anticipate that you will be here for many a year, and the place will be the better for your being here.

Your question touches on Mr Boylan's last point: he asked about the time frame around the marine plan and the marine conservation zones. Members will be aware that the Bill has a saving provision to protect the appropriate work that has been undertaken by the Department heretofore to ensure that we do not come from a standing start on the marine plan.

I will finish very quickly, Mr Deputy Speaker; I know that you are under Business Committee pressure. The work on the marine plan has started, but we will not get ahead of our proper legal authority. It has started in order to ensure that we can move that forward as quickly as possible. However, it will have to go through the full process of public consultation, which will last for 12 weeks. On the far side of that, we anticipate that the marine plan will be available in 2015. I will write to the Member with the specific dates.

The Member wrote to me recently about ASSIs. We will not achieve the target of 440 by 2015, which is, I think, what we anticipated. On the current figures of 15 designations every year, our figures will end up being around 400 or 405, I think — I am not getting any consent from my officials, so those figures may be wrong, but I will come back to the Member about that. The point is quite right: are we going to slow down the process of designation on the far side of the

Marine Bill, or are we going to accelerate it? If the Member's point is that we need to be judged by the standard of acceleration, it is a fair one. Slippages, delays or doubts are not the way to embed the Bill's protections for our marine in the life of this Government or the life of the North.

I hope that I touched on, in one way or another, all the other points that were raised. I am pleased that the Bill has come to its conclusion. The Chair of the Committee offered an invitation to all members of the Committee, but I note that she did not extend that invitation to me. All that I will say to her in that regard is that if she is willing, I am willing.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That the Marine Bill [NIA 5/11-15] do now pass.*

**Mr Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately after the lunchtime suspension. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business on return will be Question Time. The sitting is, by leave, suspended.

*The sitting was suspended at 12.44 pm.*

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

**2.00 pm**

## Oral Answers to Questions

### Justice

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I inform Members that question 9 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

### DOJ: Arm's-length Bodies

1. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice which of his Department's arm's-length bodies have moved to Northern Ireland Civil Service pay scales. (AQO 4084/11-15)

3. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the proposals to transfer the terms and conditions of administrative staff in the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to those of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. (AQO 4086/11-15)

**Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice):** With permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will take questions 1 and 3 together.

Since the Department of Justice (DOJ) was created in April 2010, three arm's-length bodies have received business case approval to mirror Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) pay scales: the Office of the Police Ombudsman, Criminal Justice Inspection and the Probation Board. The Probation Board has forwarded its pay remits to the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for approval. I hope that, once the pay remits are approved, the Probation Board will make payments to its staff as quickly as possible.

**Ms P Bradley:** I thank the Minister for his answer. What progress has the Department made in addressing the disparity in pay scales between NI Legal Services Commission (NILSC) staff and equivalent positions in the Northern Ireland Civil Service?

**Mr Ford:** As NILSC is a separate body that is not strictly part of the Civil Service, its staff are not on Civil Service pay scales. Discussions are ongoing about pay remits because a failure to agree in past years resulted in the compulsory determination of a pay increase that did not match Civil Service pay scales.

Members may be aware that consideration is being given to incorporating legal services into the Department of Justice rather than an arm's-length body. It is my expectation that, in those circumstances, staff would move to Civil Service pay scales.

**Mr Eastwood:** Will the Minister assure the House that there will be no reduction in the equality of pay and conditions for staff being transferred from the Probation Board?

**Mr Ford:** I cannot give the House a categorical assurance at this stage, but I see no reason why the transfer of Probation Board staff, on the basis of the current pay remit, would result in detriment to any individual.

**Mr Dickson:** Minister, given that Northern Ireland Legal Services Commission staff have not had any adjustments to their pay since 2009, what action do you intend to take to address that issue prior to their incorporation into the Department?

**Mr Ford:** That issue is being examined. A number of factors have affected the work of the LSC in such a way that staff progression has not been as expected. That issue is primarily for the Legal Services Commission itself to work on. The Department of Justice is assisting where it can, but, while LSC is a separate arm's-length body, it is responsible for its own arrangements.

**Mr Elliott:** Has the Minister had any discussions with members of staff or unions representing the Probation Board about the changeover?

**Mr Ford:** No, I have not because it would not be appropriate for me to discuss the HR matters of an arm's-length body.

## Northern Ireland Community Safety College

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the progress being made on the Desertcreat training college. (AQO 4085/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I advised the Assembly on 29 April that, following the receipt of tenders for the construction of the college, the project board had established a working group to seek cost reductions that would not significantly affect the overall operational functionality of the college. The final version of the business case addendum, with options based on this work, was presented to the Department of Health,

Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and my Department on 29 April. The business case addendum has been reviewed by the two Departments and comments provided to the programme team for its consideration. If these points are adequately addressed and both Departments are content that the addendum demonstrates that an integrated college represents value for money and is ultimately affordable, it will be submitted to DFP for approval.

**Mr Easton:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister give more detail on what has been cut from the Desertcreat project to make up the £30 million shortfall due to the incompetence of the design team?

**Mr Ford:** I am not sure that I could or should give a complete list of changes that are currently being worked through, given their nature. However, I could, for example, highlight that something such as the motorway training area was originally to have been constructed to full motorway standards. The reality is that its use in training will result in considerably less wear and tear than would happen on a motorway carrying several thousand vehicles a day. That is an example of where it has been possible to keep the core facility while reducing the cost of construction quite significantly. Those are the kinds of examples that have been worked through, all based on existing costs, in a way that will ensure that a robust case is being established.

**Mr McGlone:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire chomh maith. Will the Minister please assure us that there will be no further delay in the commencement of the training college at Desertcreat?

**Mr Ford:** It would be a foolish Minister who promised that there would be no delay in any project of this scale.

**Mr McGlone:** Further delay.

**Mr Ford:** Or even any further delay. The reality is that we are looking at a relatively short slippage in the time taken to complete the work. We are looking at a delay of something like four months, with an expectation that construction can begin by October. So, given the very significant cost change, I believe that to be a fairly reasonable position to be in, and I am optimistic that it can be adhered to.

**Mrs Overend:** Will the Minister outline what measures have been put in place to ensure that

there is no further professional incompetence, as described to the Justice Committee by an official?

**Mr Ford:** The simple answer to that is that we have ensured by the replacement of staff among those providing professional advice that we have a much more capable team in place, providing a much more robust challenge function to the work being done. Certainly, the project board is well satisfied that the figures it is seeing at the moment can be stood over in a way that had clearly not been the case previously.

## Bangor Courthouse

4. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Justice whether he would consider transforming Bangor courthouse into a venue for community use. (AQO 4087/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I was going to take questions 4 and 7 together, but Mr Agnew is not in his place.

The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service is working with Land and Property Services (LPS) to secure an alternative use for Bangor courthouse. To date, no government Department or agency, including North Down Borough Council, has expressed an interest in the building. My officials are working with the LPS to develop a marketing strategy for the property. I am happy to consider alternative community use for Bangor hearing centre, provided any possible use will be cost-neutral for my Department.

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister recognise that it is important that this building is not left to deteriorate, as we have ongoing considerable regeneration of Bangor town centre through the Department for Social Development (DSD)? Would he perhaps consider the building suitable for housing a theatre, with possible productions such as 'Jailhouse Rock'? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Ford:** I am really not sure that I should give cultural advice to any member of North Down Borough Council on what may be suitable. The reality is that the building is currently surplus to requirements. The sorts of issues that have been highlighted by Mr Dunne and Mr Agnew would suggest something of a cultural nature that it would be more appropriate for him to discuss with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) or directly in his role as a member of North Down Borough Council.

**Mr Cree:** Following the closure of Bangor courthouse, is the Minister satisfied that the court in Newtownards is sufficient? If not, what proposals does he have to build a new one?

**Mr Ford:** I am satisfied that the current arrangements in Newtownards are adequate for the needs of the Ards and north Down areas. However, Members will also be aware that an estate strategy for the DOJ in general is under review, and issues may be highlighted in that in the future.

## Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust: Former Chairperson

5. **Mr McKay** asked the Minister of Justice why the private sector interest in the Resource Group of the former chairperson of the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust was not declared and included in the register of interests previously provided by the Minister to the Assembly. (AQO 4088/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The decision to declare and register an interest is a matter for the individual directors of the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust (PRRT). It is not for me, as Minister, to direct the directors to declare any personal business interests that may conflict with their responsibilities as board members.

As stated in response to question for written answer 16107/11-15, the chairperson of the PRRT declared only his additional role as chair of Futures (NI) Ltd. The PRRT has confirmed that the chairperson has not declared his consultancy role with the Resource Group as an interest and does not see it as an interest to declare.

**Mr McKay:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for finally confirming that the chair of the trust, who is paid by the Department, is also a paid consultant to Resource. Does the Minister agree that that is a conflict of interest and that the attempt to conceal it fuels concerns that the police contract worth £180 million given to Resource is tainted by a perception of corruption?

**Mr Ford:** The simple position is that there is no connection at all between the PRRT and Resource Group. The Resource Group does not provide services to the PRRT and has not provided services to the PRRT. Therefore, I think I would agree with the chairman that it is difficult to see what interest there would be.

## G8 Summit: Security

6. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Justice for his assessment of the resources available for the provision of security for the G8 summit. (AQO 4089/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** PSNI plans for the provision of security for the G8 summit are at an advanced stage. As a result of the detailed planning of the policing and security operation, it has been decided that some 4,700 PSNI officers and 3,600 officers supplied under mutual aid arrangements will be deployed during the summit. All those officers will be under the direction, control and operational command of the Chief Constable throughout. In addition, 600 private security personnel will be contracted to work on security-related duties during the summit.

I am confident that there will be sufficient human resources in place to ensure that there is a successful summit and that any protests will be well policed. Other areas in my Department are developing plans to deal with any arrests with the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. I am confident that there will be sufficient human resources in place to deal with any eventuality.

**Mr Buchanan:** I thank the Minister for his response. Can he advise the House of what pocket the money will come from to pay for the extra officers and staff who are coming in from GB? Will it come out of the PSNI budget or some other budget?

**Mr Ford:** There are well-established arrangements in place for the payment of mutual aid officers. My Department is working with DFP and the Northern Ireland Office and then linking to the Home Office and the Treasury to ensure that there is no additional cost to the PSNI for the policing associated with the summit.

**Mr McCartney:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he explain why there is to be a moratorium on roadworks and what role his Department played in that? That has caused widespread concern that perhaps it is way over the top.

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr McCartney for the question, but the simple answer is "No. I can give no explanation". My Department played no

part in that, and I suggest that he contacts the Minister for Regional Development.

**Mr Beggs:** Given the inability of the G4S security company to deliver at the London Olympics, can the Minister advise the House what steps have been taken to gain assurances that it will be able to deliver on any undertakings at the G8 at Enniskillen?

**Mr Ford:** The private security contract with G4S is a matter for the UK national Government and is not to do with my Department or any part of the Northern Ireland Executive. The Member may wish to write to the Secretary of State. I can give no help.

## Young Offenders: Early Intervention

8. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Justice how his Department is supporting early intervention programmes to prevent youth offending to ensure that all young people achieve their potential. (AQO 4091/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** The Member and I attended the launch of Realising Ambition on Thursday 9 May. It is a Big Lottery-funded initiative investing £3.7 million in Northern Ireland in early intervention projects that have been proven to help young people fulfil their potential and avoid pathways into offending. I welcome that very significant investment, which will support Extern, Barnardo's and Action for Children in taking forward important local initiatives that will improve the lives of vulnerable children and their families. I congratulate all concerned on that endeavour.

The community safety strategy supports efforts across government to intervene earlier to reduce the risk of individuals, especially young people, coming into contact with the criminal justice system.

Early intervention is also a key focus of the youth justice review and its implementation.

## 2.15 pm

My officials are working closely with officials in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership to develop an effective early intervention initiative. Policing and community safety partnerships have been developing action plans that include programmes that support early intervention.



The Youth Justice Agency also supports early intervention services through the provision of funding to voluntary and community groups. Shortly, I will publish my strategic framework for reducing offending, which will cover the role of the justice system in dealing with offenders and working to reduce offending. It will also look across government, seeking to promote timely and targeted action to prevent people from becoming involved in offending in the first place.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the Minister for his response, and I welcome the good work that he is doing. How important are education and training opportunities in reducing offending? What work, if any, is he doing with the Minister for Employment and Learning in that regard?

**Mr Ford:** There is no doubt that that point is fundamentally correct. We know that the rehabilitation of offenders, particularly those who have been in custody, is largely dependent on a work experience opportunity or on further training, just as there are important factors relating to housing or personal relationships. That is why, for example, the Department for Employment and Learning is significantly involved in the work to convert Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre into a secure college in line with the review team's recommendations.

Significant work is being done, as there is in the Youth Justice Agency, to ensure a joined-up package to help young people who are on the verge of trouble to avoid getting further into trouble.

**Mr Newton:** I welcome early intervention. Where does it take place and what percentage of those who are part of that intervention scheme go on to reoffend at a later stage? Does the Minister regard the investment in early intervention as being good value for money?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr Newton for his question. I am not sure that I can give him the clear percentages that he has asked for. When we talk about early intervention, we are, in part, talking about engagement with young children in families that might have difficulties to ensure that they do not get into trouble. That will frequently involve joint working with health and social care trusts and education.

The issue that we are looking at more directly is that of young people who are at risk of falling into trouble where there is a more direct involvement with the Youth Justice Agency, on behalf of the Department, and some of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that

specifically concentrate on that kind of work. There is absolutely no doubt that it is cost-effective. The cost of keeping a young person out of trouble is very small compared with the cost of, for example, one week in custody in Woodlands.

**Mr A Maginness:** In view of the Minister's previous answers — I support the valuable work that he is doing in the area of early intervention — it seems to me that there should be a focus in schools, because that is where teachers can identify vulnerable youngsters. Has he any comments to make on that? Is there anything else that he can do to help early intervention in schools?

**Mr Ford:** Mr Maginness has highlighted an important point, but as the husband of a former teacher, I am always reluctant to suggest additions to the school curriculum, since teachers tend to feel that they get enough of it. However, there is no doubt that if early interventions are to work, they need to be joined up. In the case of younger children, the work must be done by the key agencies, which are the schools and health and social care trusts. I fully support that, and that is why, for example, my Department is a small funding partner of an early intervention project that covers west Belfast and the Shankill. Clearly, there are instances where we need to see a greater joining-up of responsibilities, but I hesitate slightly to say exactly what teachers should do for fear that the Minister of Education gets at me.

**Mr Kinahan:** What is the Minister's view on the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner's criticism of the Belfast Policing and Community Safety Partnership and the Lisburn district command unit of the PSNI for their negative stereotyping of young people?

**Mr Ford:** Again, I am not sure that I am entirely qualified to speak on the commissioner's opinion. I hope shortly to be attending a function that will emphasise some of the positive work being done by and with young people on behalf of the Belfast Policing and Community Safety Partnership. So, I hesitate to say that they are stereotyping entirely.

We need to recognise that the vast majority of young people in Northern Ireland do not get into trouble. They are constructive and positive citizens, in the same way that most older people are. The small numbers who get onto the verges of trouble are frequently being diverted from serious trouble. As a result, we now have very few young people in custody

because of criminal matters. Generally, it is around a couple of dozen, whereas, a generation ago, it could have been 300 or 400. So, those are all examples of good work being done, and we should recognise the positive work being done by many young people. Certainly, if people are stereotyping, I disapprove of that.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Members will note that question 9 has been withdrawn.

## Historical Enquiries Team

10. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Justice when he last met with the Historical Enquiries Team. (AQO 4093/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I last met with the Historical Enquiries Team (HET) on 18 August 2010.

**Mrs Dobson:** What assurances can the Minister give to former members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross who are sceptical of the work of the HET, believe that it is unfairly weighted against them and feel that it does not do nearly enough on investigating past atrocities committed by republican and loyalist terrorists, including the murders of members of the security forces?

**Mr Ford:** If former members of the RUC or the PSNI hold that view of the HET, I am not sure that anything that I say will counteract it. Certainly, from what I have seen of the HET, particularly in looking through the business case for the extension of its work, it has shown that it is robustly carrying out its duties. There is certainly no truth in the suggestion that it is focusing on members of the security forces or the police services in the way that it does its work. There is every indication that it is seeking to cover all the cases before it. The issue of perception is, of course, something that cannot easily be cured by ministerial statements.

**Mr Anderson:** Is the Minister convinced that the inquiries are balanced across the community?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr Anderson for that point, but if he is talking about inquiries in general, he will find that very few of the inquiries that have happened in recent years have been anything to do with the DOJ. The issue of what inquiries have been ordered and how they have been carried out is much more a matter for the UK Government than for any part of the Executive.

**Mr McDevitt:** Will the Minister take the opportunity to assure the House that the HET has the necessary funding to be able to complete its programmed work and that its operational independence will not be jeopardised in any way because of the way it is funded?

**Mr Ford:** I thank Mr McDevitt for that point. The business case for the extension of HET funding was approved by my Department last month, subject to some further conditions being met. That would result in a potential extension of £13 million to its existing budget allocation. The secondary intention was that the HET would have completed its work by now. The business case estimates that its caseload will be completed by the end of March 2015, on a completion rate of 30 cases per month. Out of 2,555 cases within the HET remit, 1,837 have been completed, leaving 718 in the system, of which approximately 200 are works in progress, having been initiated. The business case will show that the list of outstanding cases can be completed by 2015.

## Criminal Justice: Registered Intermediaries

11. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the rationale for the new registered intermediaries scheme, including how it will benefit victims and witnesses. (AQO 4094/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** On 13 May, I launched pilot registered intermediary schemes to assist individuals with significant communication difficulties to give evidence. Registered intermediaries will facilitate communication between a witness or defendant and others in the criminal justice process, during the police investigation and at trial. The schemes are new to Northern Ireland and, for the accused, will be unique in the United Kingdom. For victims and witnesses, they will improve access to justice and secure greater inclusion for some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Potential cases identified to date have involved very young children who had been subject to sexual abuse and adults with severe learning disabilities. The pilot schemes will assist those who previously may not have had their voices heard. A registered intermediary could make the difference between a case getting to court or not and could prevent a miscarriage of justice. The registered intermediaries schemes pilot will operate in the Crown Court sitting in Belfast and Belfast Magistrates' Court for committal for the most serious offences — those that are triable only on indictment — and

is planned to run for 18 months. Ten registered intermediaries have been recruited by my Department and have received accredited training to masters level.

**Mr Lunn:** At least that proves that the Minister does not know what my supplementary question is, because he has just answered it. I do not have a supplementary question.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Paul Girvan is not in his place.

## **Prisoners: Pre-release Assessment**

13. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the process and personnel involved in assessing the reoffending risks surrounding a prisoner convicted of terrorist offences prior to release on home leave or otherwise. (AQO 4096/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** Decisions on home leave are taken by home leave boards chaired by a prison governor. The governor takes a range of information into account, including the result of a formal risk assessment, which sets the level of risk that individual prisoners present of reoffending; the extent to which they have engaged with the progressive regimes and earned privileges scheme; results of drug tests; their disciplinary and adjudication records; any representations made by victims; and to what extent a prisoner has complied with and participated in programmes or other interventions to address offending behaviour.

In addition, a governor may also consider accommodation arrangements during the proposed period of home leave; the level of external family support; how prisoners have complied with previous periods of home leave and/or compassionate temporary release, if those have been granted; and, when applicable, relevant information from other criminal justice agencies and social services, including social history reports. In the case of prisoners who are members of a paramilitary group and convicted of terrorist-related offences, when no formal risk assessment tool can be applied, the home leave governor takes all other available and relevant information on a prisoner into account to inform his decision on home leave.

**Mr Allister:** Is the Minister confirming to the House that, in the case of terrorist prisoners, there is no home leave risk assessment of reoffending? If so, what is his assessment of the adequacy of that system, given the involvement of a prisoner in attaining a car that

was subsequently used in the murder of prison officer David Black? If no one is doing the assessing, is it any surprise that incidents such as that are facilitated and happen?

**Mr Ford:** Members need to be extremely careful about making allegations of criminal behaviour against any person who has not been convicted. As I explained in my answer, although there is no formal risk assessment tool that can be applied in the case of those who have terrorist-related convictions, the application of the scheme by the prison governor depends, on a similar basis, on the evidence that is available in the prison and in agencies in the community and seeks to parallel as closely as possible the risk assessment that applies to other prisoners.

## **G8 Summit: Police Accountability**

14. **Mr Milne** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the accountability arrangements in place for any police officers from England who are deployed during the G8 summit, County Fermanagh. (AQO 4097/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** Mutual aid officers are under the direction and control of the Chief Constable for the duration of their time in Northern Ireland. Arrangements are well under way to establish procedures that will facilitate an investigation by the Police Ombudsman into public complaints brought against any mutual aid officer deployed in Northern Ireland. That will be done by way of an agreement made in accordance with section 60 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 between the Police Ombudsman and forces providing mutual aid. That agreement will deal with conduct that has come to light as a result of public complaint. It does not address the issue of individual conduct that is not the subject of a complaint. In this case, such matters are internal disciplinary matters and are for the Chief Constable and the home force disciplinary authority to enforce. Officers will be accountable under their home force disciplinary procedures.

2.30 pm

## **Regional Development**

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As neither Fra McCann nor John Dallat is in his place, I call Mickey Brady.

## **Narrow Water Bridge**

3. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister for Regional Development what steps his Department is taking to advance the Narrow Water bridge project. (AQO 4101/11-15)

12. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister for Regional Development for an update on the Narrow Water bridge project. (AQO 4110/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development):** I am grateful for the opportunity to answer. I am slightly disappointed that Members are not in their place to ask questions 1 and 2 because I had good news to convey to the House. There is no one called Jeremiah here.

With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 3 and 12 together as they relate to the same subject. My Department has no direct involvement in delivering the project, nor has it made any financial contribution to it. The Narrow Water bridge project is being taken forward by Louth County Council, in partnership with Newry and Mourne District Council, and has received planning approval in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. My Department's primary role involves the legislative orders required for the project. Following confirmation on 10 April from Louth County Council of the proposed operating procedures for the bridge, formal notification of these draft orders was published in the local press during weeks commencing 22 April and 29 April 2013. This is followed by a statutory consultation period of 30 days, which will allow time for interested parties to submit comments, letters of support and objections. Following consideration of all representations received, I will consider whether a public inquiry is required.

**Mr Brady:** I thank the Minister for his answer. Having been in Carlingford on Sunday and seen the number of visitors and tourists there, I know that there is an absolute logic in them being able to access south Down easily. When does the Minister expect a conclusion to the legislative order process?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. The closing date for the receipt of objections is 4 June. Depending on their number and nature, I will have to decide whether a public inquiry is to be held and, of course, follow due process. No decision can be made on the need for a public inquiry until all objections received during the consultation period have been fully considered and responded to. Louth County Council and

Newry and Mourne District Council must be allowed sufficient time to discuss and, if possible, allay concerns raised by objectors. The councils will then have to report the outcome of those discussions to my Department and what, if any, objections remain. The nature of any remaining objections will then need to be considered and a decision taken on the need for an inquiry. As this issue may be regarded as significant and/or controversial and as impacting on a number of Departments, I may, after the consultation period ends on 4 June, need to consult the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the need to refer the matter to the Executive for consideration.

**Mrs McKeivitt:** Does the Minister agree that this project is critical to tourism development in Northern Ireland?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful for the supplementary question. Of course, there has been a significant political competition between the Member's party and Sinn Féin in the area: they have been competing to take credit or apportion blame for this project. This is not a roads project. It has never been a roads project, although my Department is involved in the legislative orders for the bridge. I can see tourism benefit from it, but, in strict terms, it is not and was never considered to be a major road infrastructure project.

**Mr Beggs:** The Minister said that 4 June was the closing date for the receipt of objections. Will he advise us whether there have been any delays in processing the draft orders needed to allow the bridge to continue?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am happy to place on record, yet again, in the House — hopefully, some Members will begin to believe it; not, of course, that Mr Beggs disbelieves it — that there has been no delay on the part of my Department.

Every effort has been made to progress the necessary orders. Information on the proposed bridge operating procedures was finalised by Louth County Council only on 10 April 2013. I should say that, in Northern Ireland, the construction of a bridge over navigable waters quite rightly requires legislation. However, Louth County Council requires only the consent of the relevant Southern Minister. Therefore, timescales are different, given the significant differences between the processes adopted within the respective jurisdictions.

## Public Transport: Audiovisual Equipment

4. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the merits of using audiovisual equipment on public transport. (AQO 4102/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I am pleased to say that, as the Member is aware, train services here already have audiovisual systems in place, and they have proved a success. In order to assess the operation of these systems on my buses, my Department — sorry; on buses, not my buses. I sounded like Blakey in 'On the Buses'. Older viewers will recognise that.

Last year, along with Guide Dogs and Translink, my Department completed an evaluation of an audiovisual pilot project on the Metro service in Belfast. The results from the evaluation highlighted the positive benefits of audiovisual systems on buses for all passengers, particularly for those with visual impairments and older people. My Department previously submitted a funding bid to implement audiovisual systems on buses. That bid was unsuccessful. I am committed to moving this issue forward, and my Department and Translink will continue to explore funding opportunities and other solutions that could be provided through advances in technology, including the use of smart phones, to complement the type of audiovisual systems used in the pilot.

**Mr Nesbitt:** The Minister said that a previous bid for funding was unsuccessful. Can he commit to renewed funding bids? Will he expand on the issues with funding?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question and, indeed, for his interest in this important issue. Yes, I have submitted, and will continue to submit, bids for audiovisual installation on buses. It is an important issue that I want to see progressed. I have a £6 million bid in with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) for audiovisual as a signature project. I hope that that will be successful to allow Translink to enhance accessibility and encourage uptake of public transport by those who are impaired.

**Mr Ó hOisín:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. The Minister is aware that the Committee visited the pilot scheme in the Braniel area last year and saw how successful it was there. The Committee met a number of visually impaired groups and other disabled

groups. Has the Minister consulted the disabled groups, in particular the visually impaired?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. My officials have been in fairly constant contact with the various groups on that issue. As I have said about other issues, my door is always open for representations to be made. I am supportive of improving facilities for those with impairments, and I will continue to seek support from Executive colleagues on bringing that forward.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** As Mr Steven Agnew is not in his place, I call Seán Lynch.

## A5: EU Habitats Directive

6. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for Regional Development how he is addressing the issues relating to the EU habitats directive to advance the A5 dual carriageway project. (AQO 4104/11-15)

7. **Mrs Overend** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether additional funds will be made available to his Department to enable it to progress the Magherafelt bypass. (AQO 4105/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I wish to address questions 6 and 7 together. At first blush, they may not appear strongly linked, but they both are absolutely and completely related to the A5 — the funding of the A5, and the issues related to the EU habitats directive.

The issues flowing from the habitats directive assessment relate to delay that has made funds potentially available for other projects. My Department has commenced work on an appropriate assessment process under the habitats directive, the first step of which will be to consider the impacts on the River Foyle and River Finn special areas of conservation, and mitigation measures. That work will be subject to a public consultation exercise. The need for an addendum to the environmental statement is also being considered.

My Department received specific funding for the A5 dual carriageway project and, following the recent ruling on that scheme, I am obliged to declare a reduced budget requirement for 2013-14. However, rather than await the June monitoring round, I have already formally declared that reduced requirement to the Finance Minister to allow the Executive to give urgent consideration to how it can best be

redeployed. In my view, it is essential that we quickly redeploy the reduced requirement to provide support to the construction sector and the local economy at this most difficult time. I consider expenditure on roads a specific example of activity that improves vital infrastructure and facilitates economic growth while providing much-needed local employment.

Looking further ahead, there may be knock-on implications for 2014-15, so I have provided options to the Finance Minister on other major road schemes. The Magherafelt bypass is one of those, and I await Executive consideration of that issue.

**Mr Lynch:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabham buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his question. I and colleagues met representatives of the Quarry Products Association (QPA) yesterday about the A5 scheme. They are very concerned about the delay. They are also very concerned about the moratorium on roadworks, which applies from 10 or 11 days prior to the G8 summit. The Minister of Justice told us, half an hour ago, that you took that decision. Have you spoken to representatives of the QPA about that decision and the A5 scheme?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He thanked me for my question, rather than my answer. Regardless, I have taken the opportunity to meet a number of people affected, including contractors and other representatives of the road construction industry. I am very well aware of the current situation that is affecting them. As I have outlined, the A5 scheme is delayed. We are working through the processes that are necessary as a result of Mr Stephens's judgement. We will continue to do that without pre-empting it in any way, because to do so would further complicate things.

He raised the issue of the moratorium on roadworks in advance of the G8 summit. As a constituency representative for County Fermanagh, a Member of the House and Deputy Chair of the Regional Development Committee, the Member will know that the G8 summit is a very significant and important event for all of Northern Ireland. I am very pleased to offer my Department's support to the PSNI in managing arrangements for the summit. At the request of the PSNI, my Department has agreed to reprogramme planned works on key routes during the G8. The Department has brought forward a considerable amount of resurfacing work to improve the road network in

the run-up to the G8. My colleague Mr Elliott told me that some of the locals in Fermanagh, instead of calling it the A4 road, now call it the G8 road. Nevertheless, those improvements will last well into the future. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) has reallocated work during that time to areas that are not on those key routes —

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

**Mr Kennedy:** — which means that contractors' work will continue.

**Mrs Overend:** Given the Minister's positive response on the Magherafelt bypass, if the Executive decide to release funds to him in the coming days, how soon can work begin on that project? Will the Minister make his position clear on the application of the 10% top-up for those who may be required to release land for the purpose of that scheme?

2.45 pm

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member and thank her. I place on record her commitment to the Magherafelt bypass and other bypasses in her constituency area. The notice of intention to proceed and the direction order for the A31 Magherafelt bypass were published in September 2010. It is estimated that it may be possible to commence construction in the last quarter of 2014-15 if an early decision of funding is made.

With regard to her latter point, representations have been made to me by, among others, the Ulster Farmers' Union, on the 10% top-up compensation for landowners. I have written to Minister Wilson, who has responsibility for Land and Property Services, in relation to land values and compensation, clearly supporting the extension of the scheme to Northern Ireland, and I will continue to persist on that issue.

**Mr Spratt:** With regard to the A5, has the Minister initiated any investigation into officials for not carrying out the habitats directive work when the scheme was being dealt with prior to the court case? Given that the A6 will take a year of procurement, at what stage are the procurement issues for the Magherafelt bypass?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member, who is also the Chair of the Regional Development Committee. He will know the detailed judgement that emerged from Mr Justice Stephens; however, it is important to give some

of the background. As part of the environmental assessment, a screening exercise was carried out on behalf of my Department, as allowed by the habitats directive. It was concluded that it was unlikely that the proposed scheme would have an adverse effect on the integrity of the River Foyle tributaries and the River Finn.

The findings of the screening exercise were issued to the two relevant statutory bodies — the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Both statutory bodies agreed with the conclusions of the screening exercise. The Loughs Agency was also consulted but did not respond. In reaching his ruling, Mr Justice Stephens preferred the evidence of the Loughs Agency in the context of its response to the environmental statement rather than the direct agreement with the findings of the habitats regulations assessment process provided by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the National Parks and Wildlife Service as the nominated statutory consultees.

The Judge dismissed 11 of the 12 grounds of challenge but held that there was a need to carry out an appropriate assessment, which we are now doing. I have asked for a report to be prepared to address, among other things, the impact and proposed mitigation. That report will be publicly consulted on, and the findings of that exercise will allow me to undertake an appropriate assessment. I have also asked for a third-party review of the project consultants' work in respect of the entire appropriate assessment process, including the scope of the report referred to above, to assist my deliberations.

The Magherafelt bypass is procurement ready.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank the Minister for his answers on the matter so far. I appreciate his commitment to the A5 project. In view of the fact that there will be difficulty with the money for this year, 2013-14, and there is the question of reallocation to other potential projects — obviously those in the west would like as many projects as possible in the west to be started — what about the umbilical cord of roadway known as the A32 from Omagh to Enniskillen? Given all the relationships that are being built, can he give any assessment or assurance that the piecemeal approach can now be advanced to a more intensive capital investment?

Lastly, my colleague —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Sorry, I am afraid your question is much too long.

**Mr Byrne:** — Mr McGlone also welcomes the Magherafelt comments.

**Mr Kennedy:** I have no doubt that that will read very well in the local press, and I would not dare to suggest that you are promoting it on that basis.

The situation is such that we now have to look at other potential schemes that can be brought forward. I have indicated that I am doing that in conjunction with Executive colleagues, principally the Finance Minister, and we will continue to do that. The schemes that are most procurement-ready include the A26 Glarryford scheme, which will be music to my colleague Robin Swann's ears, the A6 scheme, the Magherafelt bypass and the A55 scheme in Belfast. It is important that I, as roads Minister, offer alternatives as necessary in the current situation.

### **Buses: Marble Arch and Florence Court, Fermanagh**

8. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what discussions his Department has had with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board about establishing seasonal bus routes in areas such as the Marble Arch caves and Florence Court house, County Fermanagh. (AQO 4106/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** I recall that the Member has previously asked what transport links are in place to facilitate visitors to tourist attractions in the Fermanagh area. My response at that time detailed the Translink services that are available to the Marble Arch caves, Florence Court house, Devenish Island — the House might be interested to know that some people believe that the prophet Jeremiah is buried on Devenish Island — and Aughakillymaude Mummings Centre. There is some controversy over the pronunciation of that; we had three variations. I have no doubt that the G8 will want to flock to the mummings centre. Services are also available to the Janus figures on Boa Island and to Belleek Pottery.

Beyond existing services, Translink would, of course, consider how best to respond to a clear demand for additional services. However, my Department has not been approached by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment or the Northern Ireland Tourist Board about the issue. Translink has also advised that there have been no discussions with its staff at local service delivery manager level or at area manager level.

**Mr Flanagan:** Go raibh maith agat a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer and for his efforts to pronounce some of our finest townlands across the fine county of Fermanagh. Does he agree that, to grow the tourist economy in the North to what those in the sector want it to be — a £1 billion industry by 2020 — we need to have adequate transport links in rural areas, particularly to showcase places such as the Marble Arch caves? The only way for a tourist to get there at present is to hire a car, a facility that is not available in Fermanagh, or to take a £13 taxi out there, which is completely unacceptable for some people.

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for the point that he raises. It is an essential point because, whether it is main roads, major roads, side roads or minor roads, it is clear that the key to economic success or economic benefit, at least, is improving the road infrastructure across Northern Ireland, including County Fermanagh. To that extent, even the G8 will have seen benefit to Fermanagh's roads at this point in time, and I am sure that the Member will want to acknowledge that. I have no issue with asking the Executive for further support for the roads budget so that we can improve the network and make it easier for tourists, local businesspeople and local users to travel safely on all our roads.

**Mr Elliott:** I am really interested in the Translink network that goes out to Devenish Island. Maybe the Minister can impart some of that information.

Is there any further evaluation or assessment of developing a rail network out to the west of Northern Ireland?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He will know that we recently held a consultation exercise on the future of railways all over Northern Ireland. We have had very interesting feedback, even in my own area, where we had significant feedback on the possibility of reopening the old Armagh to Portadown line and the line that he mentions that starts in the Clogher Valley and works on through. There are, of course, huge issues of infrastructure and cost. We would have to look carefully before embarking on even a serious and more detailed study of the availability of finance and the practicalities of obtaining the necessary land and permissions to allow a rail network to be re-established.

I am a key supporter of railways. I proved that by my support in saving, effectively, the Coleraine to Londonderry line. I am also pleased to say that, in spite of some misplaced information in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week about the Enterprise service, the numbers using that service have increased by over 10% this year. That is good news. It is also good news that there were over 11 million passenger journeys on the railways in Northern Ireland last year. So, I say to the Member and the House that the future of railways and travel by rail and public transport is safe in my hands.

**Mr Storey:** Moving from the beauties of Fermanagh and all that it has to offer, I take the Minister to the premier tourist attraction in Northern Ireland: the Giant's Causeway. While the Minister is advocating his support for the bus network for tourist attractions, will he assure the House that he will provide park-and-ride facilities at Bushmills so that the premier tourist attraction of the Giant's Causeway will be properly facilitated, given the current deficit?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member for his ingenious supplementary question, given that it is a long way from the causeway to the Marble Arch caves or even the mummies in Aghakillymaude. For all that, I will provide him with a written answer on the up-to-date position on park-and-ride facilities in Bushmills.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** That is very generous.

## Ballymagarry Lane, Belfast

**Mr Humphrey:** Carrying on the theme that all politics is local, question 9.

9. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Regional Development would he consider removing the traffic-calming measures in Ballymagarry Lane, Belfast. (AQO 4107/11-15)

**Mr Kennedy:** The traffic-calming scheme on Ballymagarry Lane was requested by the principal of Mount Gilbert Community College and was completed in April 2008. The scheme included the provision of road humps on Ballymagarry Lane, Lyndhurst Park and Lyndhurst Parade.

In the three-year period before the scheme was completed, two personal injury collisions had occurred, whereas, from the completion of the scheme in April 2008 until March 2012 — the period for which the latest data is available — no personal injury collisions have occurred.



Similarly, there has been a significant reduction in traffic speed measured in the area. On that basis, the Member will appreciate that the scheme clearly contributes to road safety, and, therefore, I have no plans to remove it.

**Mr Humphrey:** I thank the Minister very much for his answer. He may not be aware that the school was demolished a number of years ago and no longer exists on that site. I am sure that all Members will be aware that road-calming measures in the shape of speed ramps are not universally welcomed by communities, particularly those who live beside them, and motorists. Is the Department looking at a viable alternative to speed ramps?

**Mr Kennedy:** I am grateful to the Member. I am, of course, aware of the position of the school. Officials inspected the road humps and found them to be in accordance with the road humps regulations, and no defects were noticed. No complaints or further representations have been received since 2009. Although road humps may not always be popular in areas, it seems that they are pretty hard to remove. Officials have advised that there is no record of road humps having been removed from any street in Belfast.

We continue to use a number of traffic-calming measures. We can, perhaps, look at that in that context. However, officials seem satisfied, the safety record seems good, and we are aware of no further representations about that area other than the Member's question. That is the present situation.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Order. That ends Question Time.

**3.00 pm**

**Mr McCartney:** On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. During Question Time, I asked the Minister of Justice about the road closures and the proposed moratorium on road construction. He informed me that it was a matter for the Regional Development Minister. This is not about having a go at any Minister, but, earlier today, we tried to table a question to the Regional Development Minister about who was responsible and who could tell the Assembly on what basis the decision was taken. To date, no one has offered any of us an explanation. None of us knows who took the decision, so none of us is in a position to hold anyone responsible for what has caused some public concern. Many people are saying that there have been too many proposed road closures, so we are trying to bring a bit of

clarity. Perhaps your office could help us in doing that.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Thank you for that. The Member may be aware that the Speaker has dealt with this previously. How Ministers address or answer questions is a matter entirely for them. The Speaker has made it clear that it is not a matter for him to get involved in.

**Mr Kennedy:** Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, this is slightly unusual and it is not quite a point of order, although it may be a point of information. My understanding is that the arrangements governing G8 remain a reserved power. Consultations with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and, indeed, 10 Downing Street have put in place many and most, if not all, of the arrangements for the G8 summit, including those relating to justice and road closures. Therefore, if the Member's colleagues in Westminster wanted to ask a question on the Floor of the House there, I am sure that it would be very well received and fully answered.

**Mr McCartney:** Further to that, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I think I have dealt with it. OK, go ahead.

**Mr McCartney:** I thank the Minister for giving that explanation, but it was his Department that made the announcement. If it was a reserved matter, no person in the Assembly should be left wondering whether his Department, the Justice Department or other people have a role in road closures. We should be in a position to give an answer to the public, particularly the quarry people, who have asked legitimate questions and have come to local representatives with questions. People can make jokes out of it, if they like, or perhaps make political points out of it, but, when the people who are not working here next week are not bringing money home, none of us will be laughing or joking about that.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I have made the Speaker's position clear, as previously set out. Quite clearly, your observations and the Minister's comments are now firmly on the record. We will proceed.

**Mr I McCrea:** On a point of order, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I did not get to my question; it was number 10. Unfortunately, I suppose, I did not need the answer, given that the answer was published in a local paper yesterday. Can the

Principal Deputy Speaker seek clarification of how the process for delivering answers to Members at Question Time is carried out in accordance with Standing Orders?

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I thank you for that. Clearly, I have set it out that these are matters for Ministers. I am sure that, if there is an issue there that you have put on the record, it will be up to the Ministers to respond. It is not a matter for the Speaker's Office.

## Private Members' Business

### Shared Future

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours for this debate. As two amendments have been selected and are published on the Marshalled List, an additional 15 minutes have been added to the total time. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes. Before we begin, the House should note that both amendments cannot be made, as they are mutually exclusive. If amendment No 1 is made, the Question will not be put on amendment No 2. I hope that that is clear.

**Mr Lyttle:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes that the development of a shared future and building a strong economy are inextricably linked; further notes the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister entitled "Together: Building a United Community"; calls for the individual projects announced to be subject to public consultation, where appropriate; and stresses the importance of the Executive developing a comprehensive shared future strategy which includes a clear vision, action plan, targets, budgeting and delivery mechanisms and which addresses issues such as integrated education, mixed housing, shared space, the regulation of the flying of flags, parades and dealing with the past.*

I am grateful for the opportunity to propose the motion. I remain convinced that there is no bigger challenge for our society than addressing its deep divisions. Of course, we have made significant progress, not least in establishing these democratic institutions. However, we owe it to the community to produce the most ambitious shared future strategy and plan possible to deliver on the Good Friday Agreement promise of sustainable peace and prosperity for everyone in Northern Ireland.

Fifteen years after the Good Friday Agreement and eight years after the original shared future strategy, people are right to expect more from government in tackling the human and financial cost of division in Northern Ireland. Of course, the scale and consequences of the problem

should not be underestimated. We know that the financial cost of division to the public has been estimated to be in the region of £1 billion a year. Despite reports of progress and some level of agreement from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), a failure to find compromise on contested issues at a political level has left many people disillusioned and disengaged. We have to set out a vision and a plan to tackle all unsettled issues that remain — patterns of segregation, intimidation and fear, all of which continue to have a serious impact on our economy and the quality of life of people across Northern Ireland.

*(Mr Speaker in the Chair)*

The Good Friday Agreement put the responsibility for leading reconciliation at the heart of government. The shared future strategy in 2005 stated clearly that there should be an approach of sharing over separation and that:

*"Separate but equal is not an option."*

It said that parallel living and provision of services have been rejected as both morally and economically wrong. The strategy was accompanied by the requirement for all Departments to produce three-year plans that would plot actions against good-relations targets, which were to be measured every year, to achieve their aims.

We therefore have to decide whether we will settle for anything less than those standards that were set or listen to people who tell us that the 'Together: Building a United Community' document is the best that we can hope for at this stage. I am convinced that the community believes in better.

Reconciliation workers, victims and ethnic minority groups all responded in numbers to tell OFMDFM to get out of town when the first devolved draft community-relations strategy — namely, the cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy — was produced back in 2010. The Alliance Party worked hard and contributed significantly to the OFMDFM working group's attempt to improve that strategy. However, when it became clear that key issues such as integrated education, flags, parades and dealing with the past were being dodged, we withdrew. Since then, we have come under attack, but as a party whose members have given their lives to the struggle for fundamental institutional and community change in Northern Ireland, we would never support such inadequate proposals. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Members, let us not debate across the Chamber while the Member has the Floor.

**Mr Lyttle:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. We did not sit on our hands. We published our own proposals in the 'For Everyone' document. We set out a clear vision of a shared and integrated society that is free from discrimination, intimidation and fear, and that is based on the values of equality, diversity and interdependence for everyone. We put forward specific proposals for a shared future policy-proofing tool that would have no public investment without testing whether it would be appropriate for good relations.

We put forward modest targets of 20% of children being educated in integrated education by 2020 to meet parental demand for new integrated schools and to simplify transformation processes. Indeed, in recent polls, we have seen that 80% of parents support a request for their children's schools to become integrated, and 70% agree that integration is the best preparation for living in a diverse society. However, only 7% of our children are being educated in an integrated setting. We also made proposals on housing and flags. In particular, on flags, the Good Friday Agreement — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mr Lyttle:** The Good Friday Agreement recognises the sovereignty of Northern Ireland as part of the UK unless and until people decide otherwise, as well as the right of all people in Northern Ireland to identify themselves as British, Irish or both as they choose. Any future change in the status of Northern Ireland cannot affect that. We believe that this unique constitutional arrangement is, therefore, best reflected in a respectful and balanced manner by the policy of designated days. That could be the long-term settled policy, whether Northern Ireland is part of the UK or Ireland.

We also proposed a meaningful consultation on symbols for Northern Ireland. There is no occasion on which one flag or one song is enjoyed by absolutely everyone, so that could be looked at.

David Ford also proposed an alternative all-party working group, with an independent chair and community representatives as well as political representatives, to try to restart a stalled process. Although the First Minister and deputy First Minister declined the invitation, they recently published the 'Together: Building

a United Community' document, which is the name of an Alliance Party policy from 2003, and proposed an all-party working group to address a number of key outstanding issues. Any change in language and any set of initiatives that will address the symptoms of division in Northern Ireland should, of course, be acknowledged, but this appears to fall well short of the fundamental change and comprehensive framework that we believe is needed to tackle deep division, stabilise economic development and meet the aspirations of people in Northern Ireland to live in a shared society for everyone.

If the First Minister thinks that this is the most ambitious set of proposals ever, he is wrong; I am not even sure that it is the most ambitious this year. The proposals seem more akin to a political public relations exercise to appease certain Governments who complained about potential investment not being possible. There appears to be little detail on budgets, work with relevant Departments, action plans and monitoring. Of course, we await the publication of more detail on the strategy.

The First Minister, amid his ranting and raving and inaccurate biblical metaphors of recent weeks, did make one very pertinent point. He said that it was fundamentally wrong that we segregate our young people on the basis of religion at the earliest age, and I agree with him. I have to ask him, therefore, whether he really believes that proposals for 10 shared education campuses and two-week summer schools can credibly claim to tackle, and produce fundamental change in, a system that he says is so fundamentally wrong. There are serious concerns that this is a decisive policy change away from the commitments in the Good Friday Agreement and 'A Shared Future' to integrated education. The idea of a shared education appears to be an acceptance of a dual system, with work to increase co-operation. The shared education advisory group recommendations merit close consideration, and meaningful co-operation and collaboration across sectors should be welcomed. People must have choice, but surely we have to work towards the more meaningful integration of our young people's education.

The "Building a United Community" document also makes housing proposals, with 10 shared neighbourhood schemes. It is my understanding that 30 shared neighbourhood projects already exist. With 90% of social housing thought to be segregated, is that really a proposal for radical change?

More detail remains to be added to the United Youth programme, which can be looked at as potentially positive.

The eye-catching headline on interfaces will be made possible only if there is an adequate strategy.

The First Minister, despite rubbishing our proposal in the Assembly and expressing his "incredulity", appears to have now accepted the Alliance Party position that the previous closed OFMDFM working group was inadequate and that any working group set up to adequately address those issues should have an independent chair and include members of wider society with relevant expertise. We need to make the search for a robust shared future strategy much more than a political process and ensure that it includes the wider community.

If we are to tackle unemployment, persistent deprivation, adequate childcare and nursery provision, health, investment and tourism, and build our economy, we have to tackle the costs of division and build long-term sustainable peace. People in Northern Ireland need to decide — we need to decide — whether we want to manage division or transform this society into a truly united community with a prosperous economy for everyone.

I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

**3.15 pm**

**Mr Moutray:** I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Community;" and insert

*"and that the good relations strategy was subject to full consultation; urges all relevant parties to fully and constructively participate in the all-party group to find solutions on the issues of parades and protests, flags, emblems and symbols and the past; welcomes the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that all relevant Departments will be invited to participate in the detailed project design stage; and calls on all Executive Ministers to ensure their Departments fully and constructively participate, where relevant, in this process."*

I propose the amendment, as submitted in the name of my colleagues and me. I believe that the 'Together: Building a United Community' document has been a mammoth step on the part of OFMDFM. I believe it has been courageous and brave to take leadership and to demonstrate a clear vision for the House and the Province. Unfortunately, there are those

who want again to point-score and who, quite frankly, are content to snipe from the sidelines but are not willing to take off the gloves and get in and try to make this work.

In this country, we are all too aware of where we have come from. Furthermore, we are all too aware of where we need to go. It is time that those who are in this Government started to play an active role in trying to make government work. I have this to say to those who continually pick holes and cause malice: stand up to the task in hand and put into practice what you were elected to do by creating a stable society and an environment in which investors are confident in coming to start business, expand or create a place in which people are proud to live and work.

The dissent amuses me somewhat because although they are willing to rubbish what has been proposed, they are yet to come forward with suggestions for real and meaningful action. We have heard much about a review here and research there, and consultation after consultation. I believe that people now want to see action. I appreciate the work afforded to this document and the efforts made to bring forward these very real and very practical suggestions as to how to deal with the issues and move our society towards a better and brighter future. We do not need to go out to further public consultation for another five or six months, and still nothing is happening on the ground. We are elected to take decisions and that is exactly what the First Minister and deputy First Minister have done on this occasion.

Recent months have undoubtedly been challenging, and, that said, some thorny and contentious issues remain to be dealt with, particularly parades, flags, emblems, symbols and the past. However, this initiative, which has brought forward ideas concerning the all-party group and community relations strategy will, I believe, bring about real change in society if supported and fully engaged with.

We can have all the documents and strategies we want on good relations, but we need practical work on the ground. We need targets to work towards and we need people around the table who are willing to work towards them. I encourage all, as stated in our amendment, to work to that end and to participate fully in the all-party group that will consider and make recommendations. I believe that the makeup of that group is fair and equitable, and I welcome the fact that the chair will come from outside the political parties. I believe that this group can make a positive change and bring about some

mature, sensible, practical suggestions. I, for one, wish it well.

I welcome some of the creative and practical initiatives in the First Minister and deputy First Minister's statement, such as the creation of 10,000 one-year placements in our new United Youth programme. I also believe that the summer schools initiative is an excellent way of integrating young people in a youth surrounding, with people of their own age, to get up to the things that young people love to get up to. I believe that the sporting programme is also commendable, and, if managed in the right and proper way, will assist in the overall aim. I believe this new —

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Moutray:** No, not at this point.

I believe that this new shared future agenda is positive for Northern Ireland. It is one that, if all in this House commit to and work at it, can work and deliver a genuine shared future for our children and young people. The time has come to work to that end and strive to have a peaceful society in which people can live, work and do business.

I propose the amendment and trust that people will see beyond the political point-scoring and demonstrate, in the House today, a commitment to the future of Northern Ireland and that of our citizens from all walks of life.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mike Nesbitt to move amendment No 2. The Member has 10 minutes.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Ten minutes? Thank you, Mr Speaker. I beg to move amendment No 2: Leave out all after "Community;" and insert

*"expresses concern at the lack of consultation with other parties, the absence of detail and uncertainty over costing; calls for the individual projects announced to be subject to public consultation, where appropriate; and stresses the importance of the Executive developing a comprehensive shared future strategy which includes a clear vision, action plan, targets, budgeting and delivery mechanisms and which addresses issues such as a single education system by introducing a statutory promotion and facilitation of shared education and learning from existing integrated education techniques as a means of achieving that, mixed housing, shared space, the regulation of the flying of flags, parades, dealing with the past and reconciliation."*

I am pleased to commend amendment No 2 to the House. Perhaps I will begin by explaining why we are unable to support the motion as proposed by members of the Alliance Party. It is very simple: there is no mention in the motion of the lack of prior consultation between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and their Executive colleagues, which I find almost inexplicable given that just a few short days ago, their party leader was jumping on my colleague Danny Kennedy's bandwagon on BBC television to make much of the fact that there had been no consultation with Executive colleagues.

A few days later, however, they seemed to have moved on from the tribe of Jeremiahs to the "So what?"-ers when it comes to consultation. That is despite the fact that, on that programme, junior Minister Bell made it clear that we are talking about a set of initiatives that will cost the taxpayer £500 million between now and 2015. Nothing could be more important financially, not to mention to the social fabric of this society, therefore, than this initiative.

Clearly, from what we heard from junior Minister Bell and the Education Minister, Mr O'Dowd, over the past few days, it is an initiative that has serious cross-cutting implications. Therefore, it is too important to be dismissed with a simple, "So what?" However, in those two words — those two simple syllables — we hear, perhaps, all that we need to know about what is going on at the heart of government in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

**Mr Maskey:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Nesbitt:** In a minute. We are supposed to have a five-party coalition. In those two syllables — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member has the Floor.

**Mr Nesbitt:** — what we hear is that those at the heart of government are operating a two-party carve-up.

**Mr Maskey:** I thank the Member for giving way. I did not want to interrupt his flow, but he made great play of the two syllables, as he described them, when referring to John O'Dowd's remarks on 'The View'. Does the Member not accept that, the following day, John O'Dowd made a very substantial comment publicly that addressed that issue? That was also followed up by comments from Martin McGuinness. The Member may not have liked the remarks on the

night, but he heard subsequently from John O'Dowd and Martin McGuinness. Does he not take any comfort, or anything, from the remarks that were made after the programme?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his intervention. If he wants to speak to Martin McGuinness, he will understand how I reacted. He also needs to bear in mind that I had been invited to an event that you were running. At the same time that Mr O'Dowd was, in your view, trying to be helpful on the radio, the news that I had withdrawn from the conference was being tweeted on social media. Three of your Members —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us have remarks through the Chair. Let us not address Members as "you".

**Mr Nesbitt:** I stand corrected, Mr Speaker. Three of his colleagues from his MLA team tweeted, "So what?"

We will not support the DUP's amendment No 1. It encourages parties:

*"to fully and constructively participate in the All-Party Group".*

I say to the Members to my left that we will, and I already have. I have started engagement and I have spoken to the deputy First Minister and the First Minister about the all-party group. We will play our part as positively as anybody possibly can.

**Mr Givan:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Nesbitt:** Briefly.

**Mr Givan:** I appreciate the Member giving way. In his earlier remarks, he referred to the First Minister when talking about the "So what?" comment. Does he acknowledge that the First Minister has never used those words, and that, by virtue of offering those parties that initially walked away the opportunity to re-engage, he has demonstrated his commitment to finding a way forward, with all of us in this together?

**Mr Nesbitt:** I thank the Member for his intervention. I acknowledge that the First Minister may not have used the words "So what?" However, I have not heard him condemn those words. I believe that the invitation to get involved in the new all-party group came jointly from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister.

The difficulty that we have with the DUP amendment is that it includes no mention of education. I think that the Democratic Unionist Party, like the Ulster Unionist Party, believes that, in the long term, we need a single education system. That does not mean integrated education, which is currently one sector among many others. Shared education is not the endgame either. The endgame has to be a single education system in which all our children mix at the age of three or four, rather than waiting, in many cases, until they are 18.

Why is education so important to the Ulster Unionist Party? Let me give you just one definition of the problem. I am grateful to my colleague Jo-Anne Dobson for bringing this to my attention, as she is grateful to one of her constituents for bringing it to her attention. It is a teaching guide for the Northern Ireland curriculum for Key Stage 3 English for a book entitled 'Bog Child', so every 11- to 14-year old in our education system could be exposed to this teaching guide. Let me be clear: I make no criticism of the book. I cannot criticise the book, because I have not read it, and I am not like one of those people who stands outside the Grand Opera House with a placard complaining about a play that I have not even seen. I have not read the book, but I have read the teaching guide, and I am appalled.

The book is about the hunger strikes. The teaching guide gives advice on how to engage all our 11- to 14-year olds in studying 1981 and the hunger strikes. It states:

*"Engage with the situations... discuss how the pupils would have felt in their shoes."*

It also asks teachers to:

*"Discuss whether they would have made the same decisions"*

as the hunger strikers.

It goes on to state that teachers:

*"could explore texts about the Northern Ireland situation and others, such as:  
- Nazi Germany;  
- South Africa during apartheid".*

So, the document makes a clear link between Northern Ireland and Nazi Germany and South Africa under apartheid.

It advises teachers to explore other sources, and that they could:

*"read some of the factual writing from the time of the hunger strikes".*

I thought that, maybe, it would suggest a journalist of some repute like, say, David McKittrick or perhaps a historian of the stature of Lord Paul Bew. However, the first individual who it recommends for factual descriptions is Danny Morrison, the chief propagandist of the republican movement and the man who gave us an Armalite in one hand and a ballot box in the other. Factual writing.

At the end of the guide, there are not one, not two, but three testimonies. The document states:

*"The following accounts are from people who lived in Northern Ireland at various times throughout the Troubles."*

They are not identified and they are not named. One says:

*"One of the worst aspects of 1981 for me personally was that my father was a prison warden at... the Maze prison... I have often felt deeply ashamed of this"*

—"deeply ashamed" — this teaching guide from the Department of Education tries to imply that it was shameful to be a prison warden during the hunger strikes.

Again I quote from these unnamed testimonies:

*"I went to France...during the hunger strikes and met Moroccans who knew what was going on here. They supported Bobby Sands and laughed at the people they met from here who considered themselves to be British".*

It is an object of fun to be from this island and to call yourself British. This is an official document on the Northern Ireland curriculum website that is supported by the Department of Education.

I say to the Members of the Democratic Unionist Party that, if you agree with us that this is the most appalling document, drop your amendment and support ours.

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I support the motion and amendment No 1 and oppose amendment No 2. I want to welcome the package of actions that were announced by the joint Ministers despite the concerns that have been expressed.

Any shared future must also address the problem of the long-term unemployed and social exclusion and deprivation wherever and however it occurs. The 'Together: Building a United Community' document recognises the promotion of equality of opportunity as an integral aspect of building a better future for everyone.

Shared education is one of the core components of the 'Together: Building a United Community' document, and I want to welcome the announcements on the shared educational campuses. I am delighted that we have support from five of the schools for the Lisanelly campus. That issue is also pertinent to Moy and Dungannon in my constituency. I attended a meeting that was designed to work out a way forward for the two schools in the Moy area. The Moy Regional and St John's primary schools have decided to look at options that will allow both to maintain their own identity while securing their future provision of a first-class education to their community. I thank teachers and school governors in both schools for their responsible attitude. They are prepared to look at all options to secure a good education for the children. I will continue to give my support to both schools to work out the best option possible that will maintain their separate identities while meeting the requirements of the area plan to deliver a first-class education. Quite simply, this is about building bridges. There was no big analysis or any big theories around it; this was simply about people sitting down, talking and engaging.

### 3.30 pm

Sinn Féin, along with many others, has long lobbied for a bill of rights for the North of Ireland, on the grounds that a comprehensive bill of rights can serve as a guarantor of the vision of parity of esteem and equality of treatment of and for all that is contained in the agreement. It is our view that the bill of rights is about the harmonisation of human rights standards throughout Ireland, within an all-Ireland charter of rights that is central to the consolidation of the peace-building process. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

*"recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".*

Some have stated that the benefits of a bill of rights could create rich cross-community debate

regarding a shared future. Equality, although not fully realised, is embedded in our Government's institutions. Developments, such as the section 75 equality duty, anti-hate crime legislation, and changes to policing and criminal justice to make the justice system more representative and human rights focused are important contributions to creating a shared future.

Many difficulties and challenges face us, but there are also many, many opportunities. Some people say that nothing has changed. Well, I think that we have travelled a very long journey since the Good Friday Agreement. The establishment of a power-sharing Government by parties from very different backgrounds, and with very different histories and ideologies, has not prevented progress being made on changing not only the political landscape but the economic, educational, cultural, civic and social landscape. That progress is evident in the development of new schools, hospitals, transport links and tourism centres, such as the Maze/Long Kesh site.

Finally, republicans have always endeavoured to work in the interest of all citizens, irrespective of their background. We have succeeded in doing so, in spite of a very austere economic climate and against a backdrop of a Tory-driven cuts agenda at Westminster. We will not be hindered in playing our part in moving this process onwards to a shared future.

**Mr Eastwood:** Given that there was quite a lot of bluster in here last week, I say at the outset that the SDLP is 100% behind and committed to building a shared future. However, we are also committed 100% to getting it right. It is important to note that we will never shirk our responsibilities in scrutinising projects such as this that come forward and in asking what might sometimes be viewed as tough questions. Those questions are asked to try to ensure that we get the best possible government and chance to build a shared future for all our people, because God knows we need it.

It is unfortunate that the hysterics of the First Minister last week soured the tone of a potentially constructive engagement around a shared future document. His aspersions of "Jeremiahs" and "whited sepulchres" did, however, confirm one thing: Peter Robinson seems to be stuck in an Old Testament world, when people out there are desperately crying out for something new.

It is also clear that OFMDFM seems completely and utterly uncomfortable in responding to any measure of scrutiny of what were its own



proposals. Kites were flown and figures were concocted; half a billion was mooted then withdrawn. The only thing that seemed clear was that junior Minister Bell seemed like not much of a source for accurate information. I hope that some of that information can come forward today.

Given all of that, we are committed to trying to engage in this process, and we will not allow the sourness of last week's debate to stop us in our attempt to properly scrutinise any proposals coming forward.

The true purpose of a comprehensive and workable shared future of government and people is to provide a new departure for all our people, especially our young people, because God knows we need it. So many people in this society have suffered through division, hurt and violence, and so many of them are still suffering to this very day. It is important that we all engage constructively to try to bring about a new future for those people.

In a spirit of constructive engagement, I want to ask a number of questions, and I hope that we get some answers. Will the British and Irish Governments be involved or be invited to be involved in the all-party group that is being proposed to deal with the outstanding issues of the past, flags, emblems and parades?

How will the 10,000 one-year placements for young people in the not in education, employment or training (NEET) category be assigned if demand outweighs supply? How many major employers did the Department approach before making its announcement?

With regard to the four urban village regeneration projects to be developed by the Department, why did we come up with a figure of four? Why not three or five? What kind of body will be used to deliver that regeneration project? Will it be a body such as the Ilex organisation in Derry? We need to ask questions about whether that is the ideal mechanism for delivering on regeneration projects.

In an announcement that ran to about 2,000 words, only two sentences were dedicated to segregated housing. We have heard from every source that segregated housing is one of the most difficult nuts to crack and one of the most important issues that we deal with.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Eastwood:** I will.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I agree with the Member that segregated housing is a difficult issue. However, will he acknowledge the work of the former Social Development Minister, Margaret Ritchie, who had 14 consultation workshops across the North on dealing with segregated housing and also introduced models of integrated housing?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Mr Eastwood:** I clearly have no choice but to acknowledge that work, which, of course, I do. A lot of good work has been done to date, but in the 2,000-word announcement, only two lines were given over to segregated housing. That, along with the debacle around the Girdwood site, does not give us much hope that we are going to deal with that issue.

**Mr McCallister:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Eastwood:** OK, yes.

**Mr McCallister:** On the day of the announcement, I made the point that it is absolutely imperative that a detailed action plan flows from whatever strategy, and that that comes with the strategy or very shortly after it.

**Mr Eastwood:** Thank you for that, and I agree with you. I am trying to make the point that there are a number of questions. I asked a couple of those questions, but there are many more. A key question is around cost. How much will it cost? I do not think that that is too much to ask. I know that we will not be given an exact figure, but is it £500 million? Is it less? Is it more? Can we even have a guesstimate? I know that the First Minister does not want to be held to anything, be scrutinised or asked any difficult questions. However, a fairly obvious question to ask is: how much will all of this cost?

If those questions remain unanswered —

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

**Mr Eastwood:** — and many more questions remain unanswered, the cautions of Jeremiah will have proved appropriate.

**Mr G Robinson:** I am somewhat confused about the reason behind the motion, as it appears to be an opportunistic motion. It would be more beneficial if the proposers had put as much time and effort into building a shared

future as they did in causing division by helping to remove the flag from the City Hall. I commend the Minister on his initiative to move Northern Ireland forward.

Other parties across the Chamber take delight in denying the unionist people the right to express their culture, even to the extent that, in Limavady, they opposed the flying of the RAF flag for two hours during a memorial service —

**Mr Speaker:** I apologise for interrupting the Member, but can he bring the mic closer to him?

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr G Robinson:** No.

Mr Speaker, I will start that line again. Other parties across the Chamber take delight in denying the unionist people the right to express their culture, even to the extent that, in Limavady, they opposed the flying of the RAF flag for two hours during a memorial service.

If a shared future is on some parties' agendas, their actions do not follow their words.

The whole ethos of a shared future is everyone working together and respecting each other's traditions. That does not seem to be occurring with all parties. The positive thing in the 'Together: Building a United Community' proposals is the concentration on the education of our young people. They are the future generation of our country, and all our efforts in this House to ensure that they are able to live and work together will surely benefit the whole community.

*"No other generation of politicians has done more to move Northern Ireland from violence and division to peace and stability."  
— [Official Report, Vol 85, No 2, p1, col 2.]*

Those were the words of the First Minister about a week ago. I agree with them and welcome them. That is why the youth of today need to be given the leadership that is obvious in 'Together: Building a United Community' to create cross-community trust and tackle misperceptions. Many problems lie ahead, and everyone realises that, but all parties must fully and constructively participate, not just in an all-party group but in every elected Chamber in Northern Ireland. That is how we will show the leadership from all parties at a local and national level. It is also important to note that the document refers to "responsible citizens".

What a challenge those words lay before us all, but we are all up to that challenge.

One of the points that has been discussed most has been the interface areas. It has to be noted that the community is at the centre of these proposals and that nothing can or will be done without the consent of the community. This is the most practical of approaches, as the awareness of the difficulties in these communities is recognised. Interface barriers will only be reduced and removed with local agreement and support. The message is clear.

We must all accept that nothing that this Assembly may propose will ever be perfect, but in order to build a shared future, leadership and a flexible set of proposals have to be produced. Therefore, I hope that all the relevant Departments, as well as Executive Ministers and Members, will fully and constructively participate in making a shared future a reality so that we can all live in respect and tolerance of each other's religious and cultural beliefs after all the years of mayhem and terrorism. I support the DUP amendment.

**Mr Maskey:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Like my colleague Bronwyn McGahan, I support amendment No 1 and oppose amendment No 2.

When Chris Lyttle proposed the motion, it seemed to me that he was more concerned about the fact that the announcement was not an Alliance Party manifesto. He complained that it does not go far enough, but also that it contains the title of a previous Alliance Party document and some of the measures that his party has previously proposed.

On that basis, I would have thought that the Alliance Party would have been well able to support the announcement and the initiatives that are contained in it. Even if, from their perspective, the proposals do not go far enough, they at least go some of the way. Therefore, I would have thought that the Alliance Party should have given the proposals more of a welcome and a commitment to work with them. I hope that it will do that in the time ahead.

In proposing his amendment, Mike Nesbitt, the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, outlined a number of issues of concerns, but it was interesting to note that although his amendment shares some of the Alliance Party's opposition, he cannot agree with its motion. What chance does that give us? What indication does that give to the rest of us that his party is going to play a constructive role in the all-party working

group, which, thankfully, he says his party will join? We will wait with interest to see how the all-party working group performs its work in the time ahead.

**3.45 pm**

Colum Eastwood's contribution on behalf of the SDLP concerned me because it seems that that party seems to think that all that is has to do around here is to ask questions. Colum said that his party is prepared to ask tough questions, but I am sorry; it also has to provide tough answers to tough questions, because it is part of an Executive. The SDLP has its Minister and all its MLAs here, so it has a responsibility in exactly the same way as every other party in the Chamber does. One of the questions that it asked was why the number picked for shared neighbourhoods was four. I would have thought that you could at least say, "We welcome the fact that there are four shared neighbourhoods or urban villages." I would have thought that that would be welcomed, even if you do not think that it goes far enough. In fact, we are told that Margaret Ritchie had 14 options, so why does the SDLP have to ask us how many we need? Perhaps it should just tell us that we need 14. At least put that proposition on the table.

I hear the party's representatives basically saying, "We were not included in the discussions", yet they were. I hear them saying that the announcement was made without any consultation with them or anybody else, yet they have had a week to say that they do not like the shared announcement details because they do not go far enough, or whatever their criticism may be. Perhaps some of their criticisms are even justifiable, but they need to put options on the table. I want to make it very clear from our party's point of view that it is simply not good enough for the SDLP to come here a week after the announcement was made to tell us that it is here to ask tough questions. We are all here to ask tough questions.

**Mr McDevitt:** I thank Mr Maskey for giving way. I am slightly curious about something, and if I have missed this, I apologise. Have the First Minister and the deputy First Minister actually published their paper yet? We will be very happy to respond to the proposals when they are published. Perhaps Mr Maskey will inform the House whether something has happened today that I missed and a paper has been published.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an extra minute.

**Mr Maskey:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

That is very interesting, because if no announcement has been made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, there has been a hell of a response from the SDLP. Therefore, I do not know what it was responding to. We were reminded just a few days ago by the First Minister that that party's members were tweeting their opposition to the announcement before it had been made. Therefore, it is pertinent for people who come to the House or get up in the media and say that they are going to ask tough questions to put tough answers on the same table. It is not good enough not to do that. I do not accept that party's right to come here and ask our party or anybody else for answers to tough questions that it is not prepared to answer itself. That is simply not good enough, nor is it acceptable.

However, I did hear Colum Eastwood say that, notwithstanding the bad atmosphere of last week, his party is committed to working with the rest of the parties. That is what the people out there want to hear. There has been an announcement, and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have a statutory obligation to make such an announcement to take the leadership initiative that they have done. It may not go far enough —

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Maskey:** I am sorry, but I am going to run out of time.

There is an awful lot of work to be done. In the past several months, this society has seen a deterioration and violence on the streets around parades and flags, we have had a prison officer shot dead and we have had a lot of other violent incidents. Thousands of our young people have had to leave this country to get work, and the best thing that the parties around here can do is squabble. I have heard the comments about the two-syllable response from John O'Dowd last week, but none of the panel members nor the presenter, Mark Carruthers, covered themselves in glory. If I had been a member of the public looking to the future, I would not only have been switching off but I would have been looking at the Flybe flights to get out of here.

This announcement is a positive step for the future. I am urging all the parties to get around the table, work out the detail —

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

**Mr Maskey:** — and provide the good, positive future that our people out there desperately want from us.

**Ms Fearon:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I apologise for missing the beginning of the debate. I came in halfway through Mr Nesbitt moving his amendment and thought that I had stepped into the wrong debate. I thought we were talking about the future, but we got a rehash of the events of 1981. We are supposed to be talking about a shared future at that, so I was confused to hear Mr Robinson's comments regarding flags. I welcome the announcement anyway.

The frustration, particularly among young people, at the little progress made on this issue is absolutely huge. A lot of good work has been done and is ongoing in communities, but that requires, and always has required, political leadership. Therefore, it is important that whatever actions are taken forward are progressive and inclusive and that all programmes that are rolled forward have equality at their core. It is only right and proper in that case that OFMDFM is taking the lead, but it requires the input of all parties to work out the detail.

Recent events have shown that this society still has a long way to go and a lot to learn in dealing with difficult and emotive issues. The best way to deal with them is in a structured environment, so I welcome the announcement of the establishment of an all-party group to deal with issues of flags, parades and dealing with the past. It is important to have an independent chair because the issues could not be worked out last time.

It is clear that unemployment needs to be addressed if we are to truly become a united community. Deprivation and social exclusion need to be tackled, and job creation and economic growth are key to that. Although I welcome the United Youth programme and recognise its potential, I have some initial concerns. I sincerely hope that the positions created are targeted, focused and meaningful. I do not want huge companies to take advantage of the situation, or of vulnerable young people for that matter. Equally, I want a strict framework in place for whichever organisations or companies come on board. It needs to be made very clear that the programme cannot be used as a means to cut costs or replace existing staff.

There are a lot of models of good practice out there, and it may be an opportunity for them to expand their work in the NEETs sector. It is

also important that whatever programmes are taken forward on youth unemployment work alongside current programmes in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). The commencement of 10 shared-education campuses within five years and, indeed, the summer schools are a good step forward. Early intervention is key to breaking down barriers at an early age and abolishing sectarianism. All of that is important for pupils and parents in building good relations.

I welcome the announcement of cross-community sports programmes. We see a return from education, and sport, particularly team sport, is also a fantastic way of breaking down barriers. As in the NEETs sector, there are a lot of models of good practice out there. We have seen excellent examples such as Football for All, which gave a presentation to the OFMDFM Committee recently, Sport Changes Life and Game of 3 Halves. I hope that the Department is taking some of these on board.

Not all of the projects need to go out to consultation as that is just a means of delaying progress even more. Some of the programmes came from ideas from the former all-party group. Some parties stayed in that group, which was good, but others chose to walk away. Other programmes are initiatives taken by the Department, which need to be welcomed.

This is about trying to move forward. We should also look at doing things in a new and creative way. I look forward to the publication of the document in the near future. I have every confidence, given the strong views that Members are putting across today, that the Committee response to the Department will be to robustly scrutinise and monitor its progress.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I am happy to support the Alliance Party motion on a shared future. It is notable that the Alliance Party accepted the post of Justice Minister on the back of a CSI document some years ago. It may be churlish of me to remind the Alliance Party of that. Nonetheless, we are where we are.

The motion makes a number of very strong points, including some on budgets, targets and action plans. All are reasonable, and the Assembly has every right to expect answers. I note with growing discontent that, although the First Minister and deputy First Minister made a statement to the House last week, they made their initial announcement to the media. That is a complete snub to Members and to the responsibility of the House to hold the

Executive to account, particularly in the absence of an opposition. The House is supposed to be the opposition. All Members are supposed to scrutinise the work of Executive Ministers, and private Members' motions, such as the one before us this afternoon, are the mechanism by which that process should operate.

I am very unhappy that Sinn Féin and the DUP have again conspired to amend the motion in a way that reduces participative democracy and scrutiny. Those parties have the lead Ministers in OFMDFM, which has, in recent months and over the past year, a history of not wanting to face the public on a wide number of fronts, not least of which is responding to freedom of information (FOI) requests.

Some weeks ago, the House passed a motion in support of the Civic Forum, yet we have seen no movement on that. The Civic Forum, as other Members have pointed out, is an integral part of the Good Friday Agreement and is a way in which to engage wider democracy in the creation of a better and shared future.

If I might, I will refer to the Community Relations Council's (CRC) recent report on Northern Ireland peace monitoring. The CRC stated:

*"The new reality of Northern Ireland politics, as revealed by the census, is that dominance is not an option for either community. There is now a demographic equilibrium, with a 48/45 split between those from a Protestant background and those from a Catholic background. No community has more than a 50 per cent share. This is now a society made up of minorities."*

Although Mr Lyttle, in his opening comments, widened out the minorities beyond Catholics and Protestants, it is essentially the relationship between the two main traditions on the island that a shared future must tackle.

The SDLP has welcomed many of the actions and targets outlined by OFMDFM last week in the House. However, the action plan deals, essentially at this stage, with the symptoms but not the causes of division. Political leadership, most specifically in the past number of months in Belfast, has been woefully lacking. In fact, we have seen senior figures in political parties playing to the worst fears of people on the margins. Sometimes, I wonder whether that is because they do not want people who are marginalised and deprived and who are living in poverty to ask the difficult questions such as: what are you doing for us; how are you making our lives better?

It is only just a little over two years since the First Minister stood in this very Chamber and said that this term of office would be judged on delivery. Yet, we have seen no delivery. In fact, other contributors to this debate are right in their analysis that we had the statement two weeks ago because of the pressure that the British, Irish and American Governments were putting on OFMDFM. Although the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are being seen together in public, we have yet to see any real leadership in delivering for all of the people of the North.

I am very happy to support the motion, and I hope that, for once, some Assembly Members will question their consciences and not take part in the diktats from the —

**Mr Maskey:** I appreciate the Member giving way. There is an amendment to the motion. Will the Member give us some sense of whether the SDLP will be prepared to accept the essence of it? The amendment asks everyone to work together from here on in to resolve these very complex and difficult issues.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute to her time.

**Mrs D Kelly:** The SDLP played a full role — a full role — in the subgroup that was set up to look at a shared future, and we stuck with it even when times were not good. Indeed, we put forward a number of reports on dealing with some of the most sensitive issues. I do not think that anyone can question the SDLP's commitment to working and dealing with the root causes of division and to tackling sectarianism. *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber.

**Mrs D Kelly:** I have some sympathy for the Ulster Unionist amendment, particularly what it says on the lack of consultation, but I was somewhat lost by some of the points that Mr Nesbitt made.

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

**Mrs D Kelly:** I felt that they were perhaps for another day.

**Mr Kinahan:** I rise to speak to our amendment. I feel that a shared future is probably the most important matter that we all need to resolve,

because, without resolving it, we cannot resolve anything else.

Most of us welcome the idea and the basis behind 'Together: Building a United Community' but were sceptical of its intentions due to the lack of detail. We were especially so when no attempt was made to discuss it. As the debates went on, it certainly did not seem together, and it was definitely not united. I want to remind people of what many people feel outside this House. As I have said before, Northern Ireland is not as divided as we politicians often make it out to be. The onus is on all of us to find our way forward.

The Alliance Party motion is very laudable and puts so many of the right ideas forward, especially the idea of finding a vision. However, as I will go into later, the lack of shared education being mentioned in it made us want to table our own amendment.

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kinahan:** No, I would like to carry on, if I may. Thank you.

#### 4.00 pm

The DUP amendment muddles and concerns me. We cannot support it. It starts with a red herring about there being consultation on the good relations strategy, yet that was two or three moves ago in the context of a shared future. It then brings back into the debate the flags, emblems and symbols that they had taken out of the debate when the announcement was made. I wonder whether that is a complete about-face. The amendment also calls on all Departments to fully participate and for us all to see ourselves as part of that. Yet, right at the beginning, they did not include any of us. Of course we should all participate. As you heard from my party leader, the Ulster Unionists will take our place. The UUP will do what is right for Northern Ireland and urges everyone else to do likewise.

There is one huge omission. The Alliance motion highlights integrated education as a small part of a shared future. Education is the keystone of a shared future. Without that, we cannot support the motion.

**Ms Ruane:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kinahan:** Not at the moment, thank you.

I want to concentrate on education. Last week, the First Minister — Mr Angry, as he was then — fumed at my criticism of his —

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I ask the Member to take his seat. Yesterday, I reminded Members in the House to call all Members by their proper name. That also goes for parties. The Member may continue.

**Mr Kinahan:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I withdraw the comment. I normally wear my Mr Grumpy cufflinks, but I do not have them on today. The First Minister fumed when I criticised him for dropping the single shared education system. Today, in the DUP amendment, there is no mention of education. Education has been dropped altogether, yet it is the absolute key to a shared future.

**Ms Ruane:** Will the Member give way now? It is about education.

**Mr Kinahan:** I would like to carry on. I will give way in a second, thank you.

We have seen, through the education system and area planning, Protestant and Catholic schools being divided. We have seen, through the Education and Skills authority (ESA) Bill, those same schools being given priority over others. I really wonder what is going on. We have heard — the statistic has been quoted today — that 80% want shared education. That does not necessarily mean integrated education, although that is a very good part of the picture. Someone asked me the other day whether the DUP is giving everything away: the flag, our city, and now our education system. As a party, we will not give up on a single shared education system. We look at the 10 shared education campuses. As has been said, that is already happening, yet there are difficulties with them. We needed much more in the statement. The summer schools will last for just two weeks. It is a long summer, and there is much more that we could do. We have 1,225 schools, 7% of which are integrated. How many actually have meaningful sharing going on?

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

**Mr Kinahan:** I know of eight. What I am really putting forward today is this: we need to include in a shared future a single shared education system —

**Mr Dickson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kinahan:** I will.

**Mr Dickson:** I am somewhat at a loss to understand why the Member cannot see that the motion proposed by the Alliance Party aspires to a much higher standard than "single shared education", which I really do not understand. Does that mean that Protestants and Catholics share the same building, but nothing inside it? The reality is that integrated education is where this community needs to aspire to go. We need to aspire to a much higher standard than that which was delivered by OFMDFM in its proposals to the House. Its Ministers are notable by their absence today. They are not even willing to engage in the debate. With particular regard to what Mr Kinahan said, the reality is that there is a much higher standard than simply sharing educational facilities, and that is what the Alliance Party motion deals with.

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

**Mr Kinahan:** Do I not get another five minutes?

**Mr Speaker:** No, you do not. *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Kinahan:** I urge the House to support our amendment.

**Mr Speaker:** The Member's time is gone. Members who have the Floor decide whether they want to take an intervention. Members should be careful when they do that, because if it eats into their time, the Member who has the Floor is responsible.

**Mr McDevitt:** Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, I did not expect a call-up so soon.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Will the Member give way? *[Laughter.]*

**Mr McDevitt:** No. I will give it a minute, Mr Nesbitt, if that is all right.

This is a welcome opportunity to debate the bigger issue of reconciliation. I am not one to try to reduce this afternoon to some sort of competition to the point of publishing the next idea about what we should do to address the divisions in our society. I am, I think, relatively well qualified — having spent practically the past two years on the CSI working group — to talk about the issues that remain unaddressed and which will remain unaddressed unless,

frankly, every one of us in this Chamber changes his or her attitude.

The opportunity to continue to publish stuff that deals with the symptoms of our division is right in front of us. If this House is happy and content to be seen as a place that does a slightly better job than the previous generation in managing our divisions, then fine. However, none of that will deal with the problems at the heart of our society. We will deal with those only when we find the political courage to enter discussions about the things that really hurt us: the past, and truth and reconciliation. Those are two sides of the same coin. You will not get to the truth without a spirit of reconciliation, and you will not find reconciliation without some sort of truth.

We need to face up to the fact that we are different, culturally, at certain levels and that our cultures are entitled to be more than just respected. They should be owned by us all. Today, we seem to consider that tolerance is enough when, in fact, this society requires us to move to a state that is beyond tolerance — beyond living, thinking or trying to respect each other independently of each other. It requires us to move to a state of interdependence. We will only get to that place when we set aside some of what we today consider to be fundamental positions. That is a sad reality that every one of us in this House must reflect on.

We look forward to joining the working group that will be established soon. I apologise for being absent for the beginning of the debate, but I was at a meeting about the establishment of that working group. We will only see product from that group, and it will only succeed, if we are genuinely willing to change the terms of the debate. That means not reducing the debate to whatever big idea of the week the SDLP, the Alliance Party, the Ulster Unionist Party, the DUP or Sinn Féin might have. It means, with the greatest of respect to the Alliance Party, not saying that integrated education is the magic bullet that will solve every division in our society. Nor is it about saying —

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McDevitt:** No.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr McDevitt:** No. Nor is it saying — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr McDevitt:** Sit down.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member should not persist.

**Mr McDevitt:** Nor is it saying that simply dealing with symbols, flags, or the huge issues that we have about parading will address the issues in our society. It is about understanding that we must go back and face up to some of the ghosts in our past, in order to find the reconciliation that will be necessary to work through to a future that allows our children to be educated in a way different from how they are today. It is about understanding that there are issues that are deep, festering sores in our society, which, if we continue to ignore them, will continue to haunt us.

It is so easy for all of us to camp out on a political position. It is so easy for all of us to say —

**Mr Speaker:** Time is almost gone.

**Mr McDevitt:** — "you know, we are just more committed to reconciliation than the others", but the test of the process that we are about to enter into is not a test of whether one idea wins over another —

**Mr Speaker:** Time is gone.

**Mr McDevitt:** It is, Mr Speaker, a test about whether compromise with conviction —

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

**Mr McDevitt:** — and with integrity is possible in our society.

**Mr Allister:** What a remarkable impact a pending visit of President Obama can have. Suddenly, whatever it takes to please around social engineering is possible — housing, education or whatever is on the shopping list and the instruction list of the visiting president, the Secretary of State or whoever is presently pulling the strings. The First Ministers, of course, react with this package. Well, they call it a package but, of course, we still have not seen it. Almost two weeks on, nothing has been published. It is still being dickied up into a nice glossy brochure, no doubt, which, at huge expense, will be presented to us as another triumph of form over substance.

Fundamentally, however, this package, if we call it that, is testament to the lamentable and indisputable failure of the Belfast Agreement.

Fifteen years ago, the people voted in favour of the Belfast Agreement. It was supposed to be

a charter for reconciliation, a charter for building a shared society. It was supposed to be the panacea for all our ills. The fact that today, 15 years on, we are scratching around to address the very issues that were supposed to be provided for in the panacea that was the Belfast Agreement is testament to the failure of that agreement.

How could it ever be otherwise? Some, mostly unionist, who voted for the Belfast Agreement thought that they were voting for a settlement. They thought that the moment had arrived when, together, the community was going to pull as one for the good of Northern Ireland. We were going to make Northern Ireland work. They thought that it was a settlement. Of course, others, principally from the nationalist community, who voted yes to the Belfast Agreement read it right. They knew that it was not a settlement; they knew that it was a process — a process that, little by little, was ultimately to deliver a change in constitutional arrangements as far as Northern Ireland is concerned. Because it is that divisive, disruptive process and not a settlement, its implementation has involved discord and disappointment every step of the way. Those who thought that they were getting a settlement have had the alarming wake-up that they were getting nothing like a settlement. What they were getting was a new means of agitation, a new agenda, a new forum for agitation — an agitation that, in order to protect the process, had to be sustained every step of the way with whatever concessions it took to keep the process moving forward.

Fifteen years on, we arrive at this situation where we are talking about suddenly producing a shared society. It was so shared that the ideas could not even be shared with other Executive members.

It was so shared that the announcement could not even be made to the House. It was so shared that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister had to be brought with bad grace and bad temper to the House to talk about their proposals and then berated anyone who dared to question anything that they said as Jeremiahs.

**4.15 pm**

**Mrs D Kelly:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Allister:** Yes.

**Mrs D Kelly:** Mr Maskey gave an explanation of the "So what?" comment of his party



colleague. Does the Member accept that as a bona fide apology?

**Mr Speaker:** The Member has an added minute.

**Mr Allister:** It is certainly not an apology. The "So what?" comment crystallises an attitude of arrogance and superiority that hallmarks the cabal that rules the House. The "So what?" comment put into words what is in their hearts and what they think about the rest of you. I have to say to Mrs Kelly that it undermines, to her party, to the Ulster Unionist Party and to the Alliance Party — not that it is likely to object — that your role in the Executive is as mere doormats. You are there to make up the numbers, and unless and until you regain the dignity and the courage to stand up for yourselves outside the Executive, you will remain as doormats in the Executive.

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

**Mr Allister:** My time has gone, but I will just say this. The First Minister got it so wrong —

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

**Mr Allister:** In all his warnings, Jeremiah proved to be so right, and so it will be again.

**Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** Before I respond to the debate, there seems to be some confusion so I want to clear up the difference between the actions that were outlined in 'Together: Building a United Community' and the strategy that is to be published.

The actions announced on 9 May are the seven headline actions that were worked up to accompany the strategy. They are things that we felt could be enacted quickly to support the wider policy framework in the document. They are a tangible expression of our determination not to simply produce another strategy and then sit back and do no more work. We want to see action, and, more importantly, people in the community want to see action. We intend to move very quickly from the design and costing stage to programmes being up and running.

The strategy, on the other hand, is a result of many years' work, and Members spoke about that. It is a policy and strategic framework for the delivery of good relations here. It is about how we move society away from division and hurt towards sharing and uniting in common

purpose. The seven actions announced previously are in the strategy, as are many more, and they will all contribute to the goal of building a united community.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the debate, and hopefully I will address some of the points that were raised. As Members know, and I have just mentioned, we intend to publish the new good relations strategy, 'Together: Building a United Community', later this week. That will be a significant step forward and will provide the basis of a comprehensive programme of work to promote improved relations and to tackle the root causes of community tensions.

On 9 May, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister announced a package of significant and strategic actions that will help to build a prosperous, peaceful and safe society that is enriched by diversity and is welcoming to all. The package includes a number of significant programmes that will focus on education; young people who are not in education, employment or training; regeneration and deprivation; housing; and learning from the past.

Working groups of officials and advisers from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and relevant Departments have been established for the projects that will deliver individual strategic actions. The Strategic Investment Board (SIB) will provide support in developing the programme of work. The working groups will report back to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the detail of what will be delivered by each project, the timeline and the indicative costs.

The immediate costs associated with the delivery of the new projects and programmes are minimal. I anticipate that the initial design and set-up costs can be covered from existing budgets and reallocations during this comprehensive spending review (CSR) period.

During the current CSR period, we have allocated £36 million to good relations work. We plan to bid in the next CSR period to significantly increase the funds available for good relations work. Since devolution, approximately £500 million has been spent on supporting valuable good relations work across the North. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Peace funding, the International Fund for Ireland, Atlantic Philanthropies and the Big Lottery Fund are just some of the funders. We have come a long way, but we recognise that there is much more work yet to be done. We are determined to

address issues of division and build a truly shared future.

The largest element of the cost of the new programmes is likely to be the capital cost of the 10 shared education campuses. We will consider all funding options available to us, including the reallocation of capital for the delayed A5 infrastructure project.

The 2012 update on the good relations indicators, which was published at the end of January this year, indicates that relations have improved between the two main traditions here. We are committed to improving relations. Although the statistics in the latest report are not the solution, they will inform policy decisions.

It is encouraging that the positive indicators in the report outweigh the negative. Significant positive trends include the proportion of adults aged 18 and over who believe that relations between Protestants and Catholics are better than five years ago. At 62%, that is 10 percentage points higher than in 2005. The number of people presenting as homeless due to intimidation decreased by 34.4% in 2010-11, to 462 in 2011-12. That is almost half the baseline of 880 in 2005-06. However, it is important that we do not become complacent, and we are committed to continuing to improve on that trend and achieve our vision of a united and shared community.

Despite the progress made, there continues to be intolerance and prejudice in our community that manifests itself in physical violence against people and attacks on property. We utterly condemn this kind of behaviour and are committed to tackling the attitudes and mindsets that can be manifested in such negative ways.

Through the finalised 'Together: Building a United Community' strategy, we will build a community based on respect, mutual understanding and trust. That will include tackling all forms of intolerance and hate crime, and working with the local community and relevant statutory agencies to prevent young people from engaging in such activities. There are still negative influences in our community who seek to bring us back to the darker days of our past. We are resolved not to allow those elements to detract from the undoubted progress that we have collectively made as a society.

Last week's announcement on 'Together: Building a United Community' followed several years of hard work. The proposals announced aim to secure a more positive future for all

citizens. The issues and difficulties in bringing our community together are well known to all Members. Some have asked why the actions were announced to the press and not to the Assembly. To them I point out that the issue of good relations has been discussed many times in the Assembly. Many questions were raised on the issue, and Ministers always answered in as full and frank a manner as possible.

On the issue of consultation, it is worth reminding the Assembly that the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration was subject to an extensive period of public consultation following its launch in 2010. The independent analysis of the consultation exercise was informed by a wealth of material, including 288 written responses and feedback from 15 sectoral events and 11 public meetings. The commitment of individuals and groups from across society to 'Together: Building a United Community' was made very clear through the consultation. We are determined to harness that commitment as we go forward with the implementation of the final strategy and the high-level action plan.

**Mr Lyttle:** Will the junior Minister give way?

**Ms J McCann:** May I finish this first? I will give way if I have time, but I want to get this out.

The analysis of all contributions made to the public consultation has formed an integral part of the work plan for the cross-party working group and informed its considerations. We do not propose to consult on the specifics of each action arising from this detailed strategy. To do so would significantly delay and completely frustrate the process of delivery. People want actions, not more consultation. People are clear about what they want, and they are clear about what they want us to deliver.

The ministerial code requires that we bring our proposals to the Executive, and we will do that later this week. The actions that we announce will go ahead to support the messages contained in the new good relations strategy, 'Together: Building a United Community'. What we announced last week were positive, tangible actions designed to improve good relations and provide opportunities for all our citizens. Those actions have the support of ministerial colleagues, whose representatives will be taking them forward in the design groups. The Assembly will have ample opportunity to discuss the actions and scrutinise their implementation.

Our vision is a united community based on equality of opportunity, the desirability of good

relations and reconciliation — a community that is strengthened by its diversity, where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced, and where everyone can live, learn, work and socialise together, free from prejudice, hate and intolerance.

We have invited Executive party leaders to nominate two Members to an all-party group, which will consider and make recommendations on matters including parades and protests; flags, symbols, emblems and related matters; and dealing with the past. The all-party group will have an independent chairperson. It will want to hear from various stakeholders from across the community as to how best to address the issues that cause community division.

We have identified an initial set of seven strategic actions on which work to prepare for implementation will commence immediately. Those actions are important in engendering a real sense of ambition and pace into the process. Many Members have raised questions and points today about the 10,000 placements for young people who are not in education, employment or training. Those placements are designed to foster good relations and improve the life chances of those young people.

DEL, along with other Departments, already has implemented, or is in the process of implementing, a number of programmes to meet primarily the skills and work experience needs of those young people whom we say are in the NEET category. The programmes include the additional support provided by OFMDFM in October 2012 to improve family liaison. The new programme, while complementing that work, will go further by providing a wider range of opportunities to challenge, motivate and reward those young people. That will afford them the opportunity of better connecting with society and the community. They will learn valuable transferable skills, which should help them and us in our wider economic future.

The 100 summer schools initiative is also important. It will provide a range of opportunities for post-primary young people to come together for academic and leisure purposes. That is part of the shared education agenda and looks at the range of development needs for those young people delivered on a cross-community basis.

The four urban village concepts seek to revitalise urban areas by looking at the education, retail, recreation, employment and housing needs of communities together in a

joined-up way. In doing that, a real sense of community and revitalisation will be forged, overcoming a legacy of piecemeal design and urban decay. Some Members have asked where those might be situated. We are looking at a number of options, but Colin, for instance, where preparatory work, led by SIB, has already been carried out, is an obvious candidate.

I move now to the 10 shared education campuses. We envisage a range of different types of campuses, ranging from large multi-school, multi-age campuses to more modest shared campuses that bring only a few schools together. The first flagship campus for the initiative will be in Omagh, where six schools from a range of backgrounds and sectors have agreed to come together on a spectacular site that overlooks the river there.

#### **4.30 pm**

In July 2012, the Education Minister fulfilled a Programme for Government commitment by establishing a ministerial advisory group to advance shared education. The advisory group comprised Professor Paul Connolly, Dawn Purvis and P J O'Grady, and they presented their report to the Education Minister on 22 April 2013. The group engaged in a widespread consultation exercise with key stakeholders across the region as well as directly seeking the views of parents, children and young people. The advisory group has made 20 recommendations on shared education and its potential to provide a framework for creating a world-class education system here. The recommendations are now with the Department of Education for consideration.

The Department for Social Development (DSD) will take forward work on the 10 shared neighbourhoods, building on work that it has already done on social housing and responding to a strong demand for that. We see the new initiative extending that work and looking at housing issues, bringing together social and private housing and considering community background issues. Potentially, that initiative will also prove helpful in progressing the urban village concept.

There is already significant support for sports being played on a cross-community basis. Historically, support has come from a range of statutory and voluntary organisations. The purpose of the new cross-community sport programme is to take that to a new level, building on what has happened already and linking the new programme to all aspects of the good relations strategy and strategic actions

programme. This is a comprehensive programme of actions that is underpinned by a substantive strategy. We will implement the actions set out in the strategy, and we are determined to succeed.

**Mr Lyttle:** I thank the junior Minister for giving way. She mentioned further consultation. Given that around 200 responses to the previous iteration, namely the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, were so overwhelmingly negative, is she confident that the new Building a United Community strategy will address the concerns raised in that consultation?

**Ms J McCann:** I thank the Member for his intervention. Yes, we will consider what people tell us.

Recently, I went to an event in Fermanagh, where there was a group of young people from right across the island. In my capacity as junior Minister, and in my particular role with regard to children and young people, I have attended different events. When junior Minister Bell and I go on visits, we listen to people, and we hear what they say. That is very important. I am really glad that, apart from a few comments, today's debate was quite positive. We need to show the way to those young people because they are our future. They are the people for whom we are trying to build this new shared, better future. It is very important that we send out that message.

Members asked a couple of other questions. I will go over some of the more specific ones. I think that Colum Eastwood asked about the all-party group. There will not be representatives from the British and Irish Governments on the group, but there will certainly be two representatives from each party, and the chairperson will be independent. We will also listen to other stakeholders who want to become involved, so it will be a wide-ranging group.

Conall McDevitt asked about the past. As I said in my response, the past will be one of the main issues. It will be dealt with along with parading, protests, flags, symbols, emblems and related matters.

I thank Members for the debate. I hope that when Members have a chance to look at the strategy and proposals in detail, we can send out a message with a clear, united voice, particularly to young people, because they are the ones to whom we need to show leadership and direction. I hope that we will be able to

send a positive response to young people through those actions and the strategy.

**Mr Swann:** I will make a winding-up speech on behalf of the tribe of Jeremiah. What a wicked misuse of Jeremiah's name, and I quote the former First Minister, Lord Bannside.

The opportunity to debate this topic is very welcome, given that the whole process around the CSI strategy so far has hardly been inclusive or successful. Following several months of talks, there was a statement from OFMDFM on 18 July stating that the CSI cross-party working group would conclude in September last year, despite the fact that agreement had not been reached on a number of significant areas. Likewise, the two larger parties did not consult with the other parties in the Executive before the recent announcement of the package of strategic actions entitled, 'Together: Building a United Community'.

The junior Minister referred to confusion between actions and the strategy. Minister, the projects were announced two weeks before the publication of the actual strategy. To use an agricultural analogy, I would say that you have put the cart before the horse; only in this case, the horse is not even a foal.

The First Minister made a statement to the House on the projects only after the original announcement. The junior Minister did well to defend the First Minister, but that does not excuse the disrespect shown to the House and its Members by not making the announcement here.

The main issues, such as flags, parading and dealing with the past, have now been shelved and put back into the cross-party working group. Mr Maskey asked what it would take for the Ulster Unionist Party to support the motion. We made that clear: the inclusion of education.

In introducing the Ulster Unionist amendment, Mike Nesbitt made clear our concerns.

**Mr Dickson:** — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Swann:** Sorry, do you want to make an intervention? Not after the last one. *[Laughter.]* In introducing the Ulster Unionist amendment, Mike Nesbitt made clear our concerns about the lack of consultation, which has been outlined in some of my previous points. The announcement was less about doing what is right for Northern Ireland and more about cobbling together some projects before Obama comes to town.

In highlighting the issue of education, which was left out in the DUP amendment, Mr Nesbitt also made an appeal to the DUP to withdraw its amendment, but I note that it has yet to do so. That is maybe because it has received the backing of Sinn Féin through Mr Maskey and because it maybe also needs its approval to be able to withdraw the amendment.

There is a real lack of detail. Take the proposal to provide 10,000 one-year placements for NEETs, which the junior Minister noted, and in which I, as Chair of the Employment and Learning Committee, have a particular interest: a number of questions still remain to be answered. How much will the stipend be? What proportion of the 10,000 placements will be in employment? How many of those will be in work experience? How many will involve volunteering for part of a week? How many will be in leisure? How exactly will these opportunities specifically foster good relations? What approaches have been made to business? Are there plans to consult the relevant Minister and Committee on the proposals? Those are some of the concerns that the Ulster Unionist Party has raised.

Perhaps the Alliance Party could inform the House later about how much its Minister knew prior to the announcement. It seems that the DUP is content to leak details of the proposals as and when it feels like it, without consulting or briefing others. For example, junior Minister Jonathan Bell claimed on 'The View' that £500 million would be allocated, yet the First Minister could not subsequently confirm that. He also cited £150 million of Peace money as an option, which certainly has not been discussed. Further to that, Jeffrey Donaldson claimed on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' that the biggest company in Northern Ireland had been in touch to offer its help with the United Youth programme. Again, that is information that First Minister did not divulge to the Assembly, and nor did the junior Minister divulge that here today.

Mr Nesbitt also dealt specifically with the issue of reconciliation and why we as a party believe that that is so fundamental to dealing with the past. I cannot imagine any reason why other parties would not support that view.

When my colleague Danny Kinahan spoke on the amendment, he said why we wanted to insert the words "single education system". He would also have said that this is an area that the DUP First Minister once claimed to champion, but his party has now decided to settle for much less in respect of shared

campuses. If they were serious about a single education system, they could have dealt with it in a cross-party working group alongside other difficult issues such as flags and dealing with the past. We do not want to settle for less. We want statutory promotion of shared education.

In conclusion, it is right that we express concern about various aspects of the shared future announcement. It is right that we include the phrase "single education system". Reconciliation is a key part of dealing with the past. For those reasons, I ask for support for the Ulster Unionist amendment, and I ask the DUP to withdraw its amendment.

**Mr Spratt:** I begin by welcoming last week's statement by First Minister and deputy First Minister. It is not surprising that all the naysayers have had their go around. To put Mr Swann's mind at rest right from the very start, we will not be withdrawing our amendment; we will be putting it to the vote. Let me be clear on that. The Chair of the OFMDFM Committee did his usual act of saying one or two headline-grabbing things and producing some document. That is typical of the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party. Nobody will be surprised by that.

In fairness to Mr Lyttle, who proposed the motion, he said that significant progress had been made. He went through various bits and pieces of the Alliance Party's document and seemed to suggest that some of those had been picked up in the announcement that the First Minister and deputy First Minister made the other day. He also said that the Alliance Party would be happy to take part in the all-party group and that he was delighted that it would have an independent chair. Again, he suggested that that was the good work of the Alliance Party. I would be surprised at that; I think that that decision was made elsewhere.

My colleague Mr Moutray, who proposed the amendment standing in his name, my name and Mr George Robinson's name, complimented the brave leadership of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. He asked everyone to get the gloves off and support the working group and the process as it moves along.

Mr Nesbitt, when proposing amendment No 2, gave us a mathematics lesson. He told us that the junior Minister had talked about half a billion pounds, and then he told us that half a billion pounds added up to £500,000. He then talked about the fact that education was not mentioned in our amendment. Other than that, he made very few substantive points, but that is

not surprising from the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Ms McGahan spoke about the shared campus at Lisanelly. She suggested that it was a first and that, already, agreement had been reached on that site in Omagh. Mr Eastwood said that the SDLP was committed to dealing with the past, but he had a "but". He went over some of the normal rantings that we expect to hear from the SDLP. He made comments about the First Minister's use of "Jeremiah" and "whited sepulchres" the other day. He said that the First Minister was stuck in Old Testament times. The First Minister is certainly not stuck in Old Testament times, because you will find that whited sepulchres are actually referenced in chapter 23 of Matthew's Gospel, so he is very much in the New Testament.

George Robinson complimented the statement. I will rush through a couple of others. Mr Maskey said that the Alliance Party complained that the announcement did not go far enough. He also noted that the Ulster Unionist Party could not support the Alliance motion, and stated that that did not give much confidence in what would happen in the all-party group.

Mr Kinahan was muddled on the DUP amendment, but most of us and most of the public know that the Ulster Unionist Party is a muddled party anyway. So, thank you for telling everyone that you are muddled today.

**4.45 pm**

**Mr Speaker:** Your time is almost gone.

**Mr Spratt:** You are muddled on most days when you speak.

I commend the amendment in our names to the House.

**Mrs Cochrane:** I welcome the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on the debate. Judging by the number of people who have come in and out of the Chamber during the debate, it is clear that delivering a shared future is seen as important by many of us. The difficult part is whether we all have the same definition of what a shared future is.

My colleague Chris Lyttle very clearly set the scene and laid a challenge to OFMDFM that the vision must be for a plan to tackle all unsettled issues. Mr Eastwood clearly stated his party's support for delivering a shared future and its determination to get it right. Mr Kinahan also

stated that building a shared future is the most important task, and I welcome that.

As someone who grew up with no interest in politics, I loved Northern Ireland as a place, for its people —

**Mr Kennedy:** No change there then.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member has the Floor.

**Mrs Cochrane:** I loved Northern Ireland as a place, for its people and its potential. Perhaps not having deep-rooted ideas about politics is a good thing: it is fresh for here. Equally, I hated the division and tensions that were firmly rooted in the past. I wanted to live in a normal society in which the important things like education, health, jobs, etc came first, so I left Northern Ireland at the first opportunity when I left school. I was studying in Aberdeen when the Good Friday Agreement was signed, and I genuinely hoped that it would make a real difference for Northern Ireland.

Unfortunately, 15 years later, things have not changed as much as many had hoped. Yes, we have some sort of stability, but we do not have real peace and reconciliation. That is why, when you scratch the surface, much of the bigotry and hatred still remains, and many of our politicians entrench these views with their politics of fear. It is fear that cultural identity is being eroded when they know full well that it is not, and fear that they assume will generate votes from their side in the future.

I know that there will be those who will watch this today and ask why are they talking about the past and flags, etc, up in Stormont again, and why are they not focusing on job creation? However, the reality is that the development of a shared future and building a strong economy are inextricably linked. Until we truly deal with these issues, the people of Northern Ireland will continue to be short-changed to the tune of £1 billion a year, because that is the cost of maintaining our divided society. That is money that should be used to encourage investment, create more job opportunities, improve educational attainment, invest in our healthcare system and develop a successful childcare strategy. Certainly, with welfare reform, having more jobs and affordable childcare would be a welcome move for the people of Northern Ireland.

We then come to last week's statement. Having failed to deliver on the CSI strategy, which I assume is still sitting on the desk where

it apparently was last September, I was intrigued as to what the big announcement was. Thankfully, I have learned not to get too excited about these things, as to say that it lacked aspiration would be an understatement. Do not get me wrong: I welcome the fact that they are now using Alliance language, but to announce a set of proposals that they expect other Ministers to deliver for them, without having had the courtesy to discuss them at the Executive, does not really say much about their understating of the meaning of the word "united".

The contributions from other Members this afternoon suggest that we are not the only ones who feel this way. Indeed, Mr Nesbitt's reasons for proposing an amendment were based on that fact, although we thought that it went without saying.

In his comments, Mr Moutray suggested that some only wanted to swipe from the sidelines and are not interested in getting stuck into work on this issue. If the most that Mr Moutray can do to progress a shared future is to stick a Union flag sticker on his door in Parliaments Buildings, it says a lot about which parties are actually serious about delivering on this. *[Interruption.]* For years *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The Member is summing up on the motion. The Member has the Floor.

**Mrs Cochrane:** For years, Alliance proposals have been rubbished by other parties, but we have been building firm foundations with the bricks that have been thrown at us. We have listened to many points of view and, from that, we have produced for everyone a strategy with a clear vision, action and targets.

I would like to say that I welcome the junior Minister's clarification today that the OFMDFM announcement was only about seven immediate actions, and that there will be many more in the strategy. I look forward to getting sight of that strategy, and no doubt there is a timescale for its publication. So, if there is indeed a genuine desire in OFMDFM to build shared future; yes, let us discuss its proposals and progress those that will lead to change, but let us not short-change the people of Northern Ireland with a lack of ambition.

Just to be clear: my party leader has sought clarification on a number of issues about the working group, and that is what he will base his decision on about whether we will participate.

The people of Northern Ireland want and deserve to see a comprehensive shared future strategy with a clear vision and action plan that

is properly resourced, and which addresses the really difficult issues, such as integrated education, mixed housing, shared space — *[Interruption.]*

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Mrs Cochrane:** — the regulation of the flying of flags, parades and dealing with the past.

I will finish by reading out a letter received recently from a school pupil:

*"I am the Head Boy of an Integrated College; I know we are not in your constituency however I wanted to note your personal and party support for Integrated Education. I firmly believe that this country needs integrated schools to secure a safe and prosperous future, to be educated in a college where one can express their own religious beliefs and cultures without fear of persecution is a great feeling. I ask that you and your party colleagues continue to support and promote integrated education and growing, caring and community based Integrated schools. Our school is massively oversubscribed each year which proves the need and support for Integrated Education in 21st century Northern Ireland."*

Those are the voices that must be listened to, and we must deliver for them. I urge Members to support our motion.

**Mr Speaker:** Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I again remind Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2 because that amendment will have been overtaken by the decision on amendment No 1.

*Question put, That amendment No 1 be made.*

*The Assembly divided:*

*Ayes 60; Noes 31.*

## **AYES**

*Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Ms Fearon, Mr Flanagan, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hazzard, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Ms McCorley, Mr I McCreagh, Mr McElduff, Ms McGahan, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Ms Maeve McLaughlin, Mr*

*Mitchel McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr Maskey, Mr Milne, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan, Mr Spratt, Mr Storey, Mr Weir, Mr Wells.*

*Tellers for the Ayes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson*

## **NOES**

*Mr Allister, Mr Attwood, Mr Beggs, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dobson, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mr Elliott, Mr Ford, Mr Hussey, Mrs D Kelly, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr Lunn, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr McCarthy, Mr B McCrea, Mr McDevitt, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr P Ramsey, Mr Rogers, Mr Swann.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Kennedy and Mr Kinahan*

*Question accordingly agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes that the development of a shared future and building a strong economy are inextricably linked; further notes the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister entitled "Together: Building a United Community"; and that the good relations strategy was subject to full consultation; urges all relevant parties to fully and constructively participate in the all-party group to find solutions on the issues of parades and protests, flags, emblems and symbols and the past; welcomes the statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that all relevant Departments will be invited to participate in the detailed project design stage; and calls on all Executive Ministers to ensure their Departments fully and constructively participate, where relevant, in this process.*

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

## **Farm Incomes**

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

**Mrs Dobson:** I beg to move

*That this Assembly notes the recent publication of the 'Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture 2012' and 'Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland 2011/12'; expresses significant concern about the collapse in the total income from farming (TIFF), which fell by 50.6%, 52.2% in real terms, to £143 million compared to £290 million in 2011; notes that farmers have experienced an exceptionally difficult 12 months due to a multitude of aggravating circumstances; and therefore calls upon the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the actions she has taken to alleviate the pressures which are faced by farmers and their families which are within her control.*

First, I declare an interest, as my husband is a beef and cereal farmer.

Local agriculture has been in the media in recent days. We have just witnessed an incredibly successful Balmoral show at its new home at Balmoral Park, and I commend the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) for its foresight and vision. It is therefore extremely timely that we have the opportunity this evening to discuss the future of the industry, given the very grave situation being faced by farmers across Northern Ireland. As the SDLP amendment points out, that includes difficulties in accessing credit from the banks.

The motion continues the Ulster Unionist mantra of, "Doing what's right for Northern Ireland". It highlights the drastic fall — 52% in real terms — in total income from farming between 2011 and 2012, and calls on the Minister to outline what action she is taking to alleviate the multitude of pressures that are faced by farmers and their families. That is not so much a fall as a plummet in income for farming that will yield serious long-term damage to farmers across Northern Ireland. However, many of the farmers whom I have spoken to



recently would have happily settled for a 52% fall. For far too many, the situation is much worse than the statistics alone suggest.

No business would ever remain sustainable if it were forced to run at such a loss. However, farming is no ordinary business. Farmers cannot just resign from their job one day and start another the next. It is their livelihood; it is in their blood. That is why the statistics in the 'Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture 2012' are so important. They demonstrate to those who do not know what it is like to work in a farming environment just how dire the situation is for our farmers.

However, it is the human interest stories behind the statistics that are so important: the families struggling to make ends meet, and the worry and the stress of not knowing whether you will have a viable business to hand over to your children. We must never forget that those children will be the next generation of farmers in Northern Ireland.

It is a sad reflection on our Government that it has taken a crisis such as the recent severe weather, to really expose, as the motion states, the "multitude of aggravating circumstances" faced by our farmers and the wider industry. It is a crisis that has stretched many of our families to financial and emotional breaking point.

If I may, I will give the House an example of one of the many farmers who contacted my office. The farmer phoned me on Friday afternoon to tell me that he was down to his last two wheat bales. After that, he did not know where he was going to get feed for his 100 cattle. He told me that his business was in dire need and that, to make matters worse, he had not yet received his single farm payment. Like many farmers, he did not contact any politician until he was in direst need, and I am sure that many in the House can give similar examples.

It is in the nature of farmers who live in isolated rural communities to struggle on in silence rather than giving in to the fact that they need help. Minister, I have contacted your office about that farmer and many others in recent weeks. However, the underlying problem remains. Farmers need our help, and they need to look to the Executive to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. They have enough problems running their business without further bureaucratic interference.

Farming is a deeply rewarding job, but we must never forget that it can also be a very dangerous profession. When farmers are

forced, for a multitude of reasons, to work harder to increase their output, the risk on the farm increases as well. We have talked a lot about farm safety — indeed, numerous tragic incidents have been recorded in the House in recent months. However, if we are to avoid further tragedies on our farms, there must be a dramatic change in attitude across the supply chain; a move towards returning stability and profitability for all; and a move aimed at increasing farm incomes and stemming the looming tsunami of insolvency and financial hardship that too many farmers are facing.

The human stories make the statistics real. The 52% fall in incomes should be viewed by the Executive and the Minister as a wake-up call to help farmers, especially those hardest hit by the severe weather in March. I recognise that limited financial assistance is coming and acknowledge the importance of the fodder scheme, but waiting for up to 12 weeks after the crisis is far too long. It does not give farmers confidence that the Executive have their backs.

Long-term problems cannot be solved by short-term measures. These are knee-jerk policies rather than those of a strategist, and they do not tackle the root causes. The Ulster Unionist Party welcomed the ambitious targets in the Agri-Food Strategy Board's (AFSB) 'Going for Growth' action plan, and I again praise the work of Tony O'Neill and his board. They have laid out a road map that points towards real, effective change in the industry, but the proof of the pudding will be in the delivery. If the report is to deliver real results for the industry as a whole, the change must take place on the farm and in the factory. As we plan for the future, there must be fairness for all elements in the industry: for example, the target to create 15,000 new jobs across the industry cannot be achieved without working directly with farmers to increase stability and return profitability to the supply chain.

The report recognises the need for a new approach and a change of mindset in the supply chain, and the Ulster Unionist Party has been calling for that for some considerable time. The answer lies in farmyards across Northern Ireland.

The House must never forget this simple truth: without farmers to produce, there would be nothing for local processors to manufacture and nothing for our retailers to sell. As 'Going for Growth' rightly points out, there is only one supply chain. That is why I encourage Members, when reading the report, to pay particular attention to sentences starting with "Government must", and I would welcome

assurances from the Agriculture Minister that her Department will act on those targets.

There are many challenges before the Minister, not least to ensure that the funding requirements, as laid out in the document, are met by the Executive; to engage with her Executive colleagues to deliver on the cross-cutting issues, including planning, innovation and tapping into overseas markets; to deliver cost-effective regulations that work with farmers rather than hampering their business operations; and to urgently reduce bureaucracy in all areas, which has been a dismal failure thus far.

In saying this, I recognise that there are an equal number of industry "musts" in the report. However, I urge the Minister to take the lead in driving forward this action plan as a vehicle to address many of the issues that my party's motion highlights. We now need to move from paper to action. I commend the motion to the House.

**5.15 pm**

**Mr Byrne:** I beg to move the following amendment:

*Insert after "circumstances" ", including restricted bank credit facilities".*

The SDLP has put in a short amendment to the motion as presented by Mrs Dobson. We support the motion and are adding an additional element to it, which we think is relevant.

I echo the sentiments of the proposer on the new Balmoral show at the Maze. Everyone who was there last week will have been very impressed by what happened, and we wish the RUAS every congratulations for the future.

I welcome the motion and the opportunity to put forward the SDLP's amendment to include the words, "including restricted bank credit facilities". Farming and the agrifood sector are our biggest private sector industries in Northern Ireland, and, for this reason, they need to be supported. They are interdependent: farmers need to sell their produce, and the agrifood industry needs produce for their businesses to operate. Meat-processing plants can survive and be profitable only if they have animals being killed. For that reason alone, we need to ensure that farmers can earn a realistic income from their businesses to support themselves and their families.

We are all aware of the difficulties that farmers face. They are dependent on weather, farmgate prices, food scares and rising costs. Feedstuffs are up 6.2% per ton, and, because of the circumstances, farmers have had to purchase more. Thus, volume purchased is up by 5-6%. On top of that, fuel is up by 5% in the past year. The single farm payment that was used by farmers to supplement income dropped in 2012 by 8.5% due to an appreciation of sterling against the euro.

As the motion states, farm income fell by over 50% in 2011-12, and it is expected to decrease by a further 32% in the current year, 2012-13. If this is the case, farmers will have to seek work elsewhere to supplement their income. The question is, where will they get the alternative work? There was a time when the construction industry was good, and they could get part-time work.

The agrifood industry can survive only if we have a vibrant farming industry. We need to ensure that we have systems in place to support it. That is why it is very welcome that the Agri-Food Strategy Board announced the publication last week of a strategy on the way forward. It will require strong government intervention. Mr Tony O'Neill was with the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development this afternoon, and he signalled the need for £400 million from government over three years, which includes £250 million directly into the farm business improvement scheme.

Besides having grants to help the industry, we need to ensure that they have banking facilities to support their farms. Many farms are tied by restricted banking facilities and ever-increasing bank charges. In Northern Ireland, there have always been four main banks: First Trust; Northern Bank, now Danske Bank; Ulster Bank; and Bank of Ireland. Unfortunately, during the boom, other banks came in to lend money for some schemes and investments that lacked real viability, particularly in property development. Anglo Irish Bank and HBOS, with their overenthusiastic lending, encouraged some of our traditional banks to lend recklessly, and we all know, saw and, indeed, felt the consequences of that when the crisis hit. It is well documented that Anglo Irish Bank and HBOS withdrew looking to recover moneys owed to them, putting many businesses into bankruptcy.

Our traditional banks, because they had lent too much money, had to tighten up, and they started to put pressure on their borrowers. The sad thing about it is that the banks that are still operating here are now pressurising good,

viable businesses through increased charges and extra interest charges. They are making it more difficult for many of them.

Due to the nature of farming, many farm businesses operate on an overdraft facility that is charged at well above the base rate. By their nature, overdrafts are flexible and can suit farmers in that they allow them cash flow to work with.

The problem with a bank overdraft, however, is that it can be withdrawn by a telephone call from a bank manager. As an overdraft can be called in at any time, farmers and their business are always vulnerable.

Another issue that is causing a lot of concern in many rural communities is the closure of bank branches. I see Mr Hussey is in the Chamber. He knows about the closure of a bank in Fintona, two in Dromore, one in Newtownstewart and one in Castlederg. That is what the banks are doing, and it is adversely affecting the farming community. This is causing farmers great anxiety. Many are having to sell animals to keep the bank at bay, because they have used the family home and farm as security for their loan. Traditionally, the banks were very happy to make loans to farmers because a loan leveraged on a farm was regarded as having good security. That is no longer the case.

Farming and the agrifood industry are vital to kick-start the economy in the current downturn. Food is the one product that we continue to export. Northern Ireland exports, on average, 75% of all food produced. Business has the support of Invest Northern Ireland to grow. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) needs to be more innovative in tackling the problems that farmers are facing, and delays in payments are causing farmers great pain.

The Agri-Food Strategy Board report offers a template for the way forward, but the current fodder crisis and the lack of bank credit facilities are adversely affecting farms. On 16 May this year, the Minister stated:

*"The banks are making credit available, and I would particularly commend the initiative by the Ulster Bank which has made up to £10million of additional funding available."*

Yes, the bank publicly announced an extra £10 million, but I know of many farm businesses that cannot get access to any extra credit facilities. It sounds good, but if you are at your limit and cannot pay for fodder, that £10 million

does not mean much. I hope that the Government here and the Minister will go back to the banks soon and emphasise the need for extra short-term credit. Recently in London, the DEFRA Minister, Owen Paterson, called a summit meeting involving the National Farmers' Union, all the banks, the landowners and those with farming interests. He emphasised the need for the banks to be more lenient and helpful in the current situation.

This is not a day for kicking the Department or the Minister; it is a day for facing up to some of the difficulties that farmers are encountering. The Government cannot solve all problems, but they can sometimes help.

**Mr Frew:** I congratulate the Members who proposed the motion and I welcome the amendment, which adds to the motion by focusing on the issues around the banking sector and the problems that the farming community faces from that perspective.

We have talked about the farming industry a lot, even in recent days, in the House. It does not sit easily that we in the Chamber can debate to death the agrifood industry and how brilliant it is, and how it will take Northern Ireland out of recession. That has the potential to be true: we are good at producing, processing, promoting and selling food. We should and could be better, and we will be better in the coming years. I say that with regard to the published report of the Agri-Food Strategy Board. That is all well and good, but while we talk up the agrifood industry, how good it is and how brilliant the traceability system is — that is all true and right — there is a blind spot when it comes to how the primary part of that industry is suffering so badly, for a number of reasons, that, at the end of the year, we can record that farmers' incomes are so low, having fallen by over 50%. That is stark reading.

When we talk about agrifood — how good and brilliant it is, how it is going through the roof and how it will bring Northern Ireland out of recession — yet we see such a dramatic fall in the incomes of farmers, something has to happen and something has to change. There are a number of factors, not just one. It is not just the supply chain and all the difficulties and complications around it and how everyone seems to fleece everybody to try to get as much profit as they can, whether at processor level or, as I suspect, more so at the retail level. Something has to change. It is stark enough reading that farm incomes have fallen by 50% and over, but I see the human side of all that when I have farmers and their families coming into my constituency office. They sit down in

front of my desk. The wife, son or daughter comes in with the farmer. The farmer cannot look you in the eye. He looks down at his shoes. He does not want to be there, and sometimes he does not want to acknowledge how far down the system he has fallen. He cannot cope; he has to admit defeat; he has to ask for support, which is something he has maybe never asked for before in his life. He has to face the problem in front of his wife or his daughter, which is probably harder, or his son, which is probably harder still. You see tears in his eyes as we talk through his problems. Most of it — in fact, all of it — is financial, but the elements leading up to the failure in the business, at any given time, are, in most cases, no fault of his.

We can start stressing about effective and efficient farming and all that; but there are human beings involved who have been doing this for decades and have had to do it because of pressures from other ways and means. It is hard to listen to because, most of the time, when a farmer comes through the door of your advice centre, it is already too late to effect change to the greater good. We can still effect change. It is never too late to seek help, but we have to make sure to do it.

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

**Mr Frew:** I am keen to hear from the Minister as to how she can help to alleviate the pressures on the farming community at this time.

**Mr McMullan:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. The farming industry is going through its worst period in modern times. Globally, the weather is the same. Farming here has been hit by a toxic combination of poor weather, rising feed costs and the strengthening of sterling against the euro. America, one of the biggest producers of wheat and animal feed, is going through one of the worst droughts in its history, and that has forced up the prices of barley, wheat and soya to record levels. Wheat prices have already been agreed at £164 per ton for 2014.

At home, we have increasing fuel prices, bad weather and poor crops, which have all led to a drop in total income from farming from £290 million in 2011 to £143 million in 2012. That is just over 50% in one year. The farmer is facing rising costs. Unfortunately, his farmgate prices are not keeping up with the rising costs of production. It is forecast that average farm incomes across all sectors are expected to

decrease from just over £34,000 in 2010-11 to £23,000 in 2012-13. That is a decrease of nearly £11,000, or 32%, per farm. With the decrease in value of some of the farming sectors at critical levels, some of the examples from the period 2010-11 to 2012-13 are as follows. The biggest fall, of 53%, has been in the dairy industry; pigs have fallen by 32%; cattle and sheep, under the less-favoured areas scheme, by 16%; and the general fall across all sectors is by 32%.

The motion calls on the Minister to detail the actions she has taken to alleviate the pressures on the farming industry, farmers and their families. Unfortunately, nobody can be blamed for the weather, global prices or the European exchange rate, although some people may think that they should be. That is outside the remit of the Department, but the Minister has brought forward programmes to help farmers with the competitive strand of the rural development programme. The Department has provided £45 million for a number of schemes, including the farm modernisation programme, which provides support for farmers to modernise their holdings and reduce production costs, and the focus farms programme, which promotes best practice, modern technology and new and innovative farming methods. Those schemes are all beneficial to the industry.

### 5.30 pm

Animal health is another issue that is draining the industry of millions of pounds a year. Bovine TB costs the industry here millions each year, and part of those costs are, ultimately, borne by farmers when their herd is locked down and they cannot move their cattle. The Minister has moved to set up two focused areas to look at the issue and, as you know, badgers in those areas will be captured, tested and released if negative or removed if positive.

The Minister has also brought forward the payment of the 2013 less-favoured areas compensatory allowance scheme three weeks earlier than planned. The Minister has told the Department that payments under the countryside management scheme are to begin in May 2013, four months earlier than last year. Critically, farmers will also benefit from the Minister's decision not to apply a further year of voluntary modulation for the 2013 single farm payments. The Minister took that decision because of the difference in the exchange rate between the euro and sterling. If the Minister had not taken that step, farmers would have been facing a reduction in single farm payments of somewhere in the region of €20 million. That move means that an extra £15 million a year

will go directly into the pockets of the farmers, which will be able to be spent and regenerate the community.

During the recent snow crisis, we saw how the Minister moved in a short time with the hardship payment scheme, which is nearly ready to roll out to the farmers. Now, we have the fodder crisis, and we have moved very quickly on that. We heard that debate earlier, and some people said that we were slow to get that out, but we were told the exact time frame on that, so nobody can come back and say that we were not quick enough.

Basically, the Minister has moved. She has recognised the plight with regard to of the income of farmers and done all that she can. It is now up to the Assembly to move in behind the Minister —

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

**Mr McMullan:** — and help her all it can to help the farming industry.

**Mr McCarthy:** On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the motion and the amendment. I thank Jo-Anne Dobson and Joe Byrne for bringing this very important issue before the Assembly. It could be regarded as a follow-on from yesterday's debate on the plight of our hill farmers, and it could be said that it is a continuation of our debate in the Assembly from 8 October last year.

The motion asks the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to give us a detailed report of what she has done to ease the pressures on our hard-pressed farming industry since, perhaps, October 2012. We await her response with interest. I had to rush off yesterday evening, but the Minister will be delighted to know that I will be able to hang around to hear her response. However, given what her colleague behind her has just said, I may be able to go early, because Oliver expressed the work that she and her Department have done. We will see how we go as the time goes on.

In my contribution back in October, I said that we do not or cannot blame our farmers for the conditions that they are experiencing. Situations outside their control, such as rising feed prices throughout the world, severe weather, low prices for farm produce and high oil prices have remained for such a long period. Those conditions remain with us today, and, as a consequence, farmers' incomes have reduced

substantially. Unless something is done urgently, the future remains very gloomy.

It is important for Members to acknowledge the excellent quality of everything that our farmers produce, despite the conditions that they often have to work in. I pay tribute to all farming organisations throughout Northern Ireland for their work in looking after and co-operating with the interests of the farming community. I continue to appeal to all householders in Northern Ireland to ensure that, when they do their weekly shop, Northern Irish produce is always at the top of their list. Apart from it being the best quality, it will ensure the continuation of local employment and of our vibrant rural communities.

The recently produced agrifood strategy was mentioned. We listened to the chief executive of the Agri-Food Strategy Board today in Committee. He has many detailed recommendations, and we wish the strategy a fair wind as it could reinvigorate the agrifood business, giving Northern Ireland up to 1,500 new jobs. Maybe it was 15,000?

**Mrs Dobson:** It was 15,000.

**Mr McCarthy:** Even the best can make mistakes. That is some ambition, and we hope that it can be achieved in the farming industry. We sincerely hope for a positive response from Brussels regarding the common agricultural policy in order to see a better future all round.

In conclusion, the 'Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture 2012' and 'Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland 2011/12' quite clearly point out in stark terms the dramatic fall in farmers' incomes. It is imperative that we reverse that trend at the earliest opportunity so that our farmers can secure a decent living off the land, and our young people can follow on and revive a once great industry. I hope that the Minister can give us all some encouraging responses at the end of the debate.

**Mr Irwin:** At the outset, I declare an interest as a farmer. I will make general remarks on the subject. However, I will comment with an acute awareness of the difficulties facing our farmers at this time.

The statistical review referred to in the motion confirms what many in the farming sector have experienced in recent times. The figures are a reality check, if one were needed, as to the importance of ensuring that farmers are given a fair return for their produce. The drop in income from £290 million to £143 million is a significant

issue for agriculture and means that thousands of farming families have a great deal less income to survive on. That has a knock-on effect in many other areas such as our wider rural communities.

The total income from farming is measured as the tangible returns for the labour, time, management and capital invested by the farming family. In an industry in which traditional farmers do not take a wage in the purest sense, those figures illustrate such an alarming drop that the impact of the collapse in income will be much more severe in real terms for those families.

The current fodder crisis is a case in point. In recent months, farmers have been unable to get animals to grass and have run out of fodder. Many farmers have had to resort to buying in feed at sharply rising prices at a time when, in normal circumstances, operational costs would reduce. That puts a great strain on farm budgets, and in many cases, it is obliterating any margin for profit.

The past year has been a particularly trying and difficult time for farmers, and, as I have said in previous contributions to the House and in the press, many of the issues are beyond the control of farmers. Issues such as cooler weather preventing growth, sustained wet weather preventing work on the ground and getting slurry sprayed, getting animals to grass, along with the misery of the recent snow for hill farmers in County Down and the continued rise of energy feed costs, all combine to paint a bleak picture. However, farmers are resilient by nature, and many possess a never-quit attitude. The farming industry is built on hard graft, and that grit and determination has seen us through many difficult times. However, working at a loss is obviously unsustainable in the longer term. Processors and retailers need to recognise that our primary producers are the bedrock of our agrifood industry.

I welcome the publication of the agrifood strategy and the recognition of the need to create a single and fully integrated supply chain, because the present situation totally disregards the primary producers, and the costs that they incur are not being recognised by those further along the chain.

I note the SDLP's proposed amendment regarding the inflexibility of banks to see farmers over this difficult period. I have had numerous discussions with various bank officials through my role as a public representative and have pressed the need for increased flexibility, especially in the agrifood

sector, given how important it is to our overall economy.

The agrifood industry is worth around £4.4 billion to the local economy and employs almost 100,000 people in Northern Ireland. That is significant, and it is vital that the proposals in the agrifood strategy are fully developed and taken forward. The farmer must not be forgotten within the strategy. Although we often hear of innovation and success in the processing and marketing sectors, which is, of course, marvellous, we must also see the Department and Executive work to lessen the burden on the primary producer.

The motion calls on the Minister to tell the House the actions she has already taken. However, it would be prudent for the Minister also to inform the House about the actions that she plans to take in the immediate future to relieve the pressure.

I know from speaking to farmers that there is a need for a much faster response from DARD in processing single farm payments, to name but one issue. That continues seriously to hamper the farm operation as farmers wait for months for their payments to come through. There is also the confusion and minefield of paperwork that has come with the new land parcel identification system (LPIS) map system. I will have an opportunity to question the Minister in the Chamber on that issue in the coming days.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Irwin:** Those issues aside, I welcome the recent strategy put forward for the development of the agrifood industry. I hope that the actions that will stem from this report will improve the situation for farmers and their families, particularly given the difficulties of recent months.

**Mr McAleer:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Most Members in the Chamber are from rural constituencies and know that farming is a way of life for many of the families that we represent. It is worrying that the aggregate income from farmers decreased by over 50% in 2012. We have heard some human stories around the Chamber this evening about the impact of that on farm families. We also heard that from the Rural Support charity when it spoke to the Committee recently.

At the risk of repeating what was said yesterday, there are many challenges, the

weather being one. Farmers are also forced to house their cattle earlier, and they are eating into already depleted silage stocks. At the same time, farmers are prevented from carrying out second and third cuts due to the extreme weather. The recently introduced fodder release scheme, which we were told earlier has seen 1,000 tons of supplies delivered since the weekend, is no doubt very welcome in the sector.

As was said previously, the farmers' plight is made worse by the fluctuating strength of the pound against the euro. As Mr McMullan said, the exchange rate is set by the European Central Bank and is beyond our control. Last year, however, we saw a reduction of almost 8% in the single farm payment for farmers already under pressure. That resulted in a £20 million shortfall due to the exchange rate. On top of that, farmers had poor farmgate prices.

Dairy farmers, for example, are forced to accept a price for milk that is lower than the production costs, yet the supermarket chains can make a huge profit margin — as much as 250% — on the same produce. It remains to be seen what impact, if any, the appointed grocery adjudicator will have on that in trying to introduce some fair play.

#### 5.45 pm

I welcome the fact that, to date, the Minister has been working closely with the industry and, along with Minister Foster, has set up the Agri-Food Strategy Board. Through the Department, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), the Minister has highlighted the importance of education, training, technical support and research to help efficiencies.

At the risk of pre-empting what the Minister may say, I want to refer briefly to a number of important matters that are in our information packs and that I have picked up from the press and departmental material in recent times. It is important to point out some measures that have been taken by the Department to help address the financial hardships experienced by our farmers, one of which is the issue of the agrienvironment payments four months earlier than last year. Indeed, the Minister has asked her Department to consider favourably any request for force majeure regarding the less-favoured area compensatory allowance (LFACA) payments to farmers who lost livestock in the recent snow.

As I said earlier, she introduced the hardship and fodder schemes and suspended the voluntary modulation on single farm payments in 2013. The single farm payments have gone out much faster this year than they did in previous years. In addition, she has allocated £5 million to rural broadband. There are many other examples, which, no doubt, the Minister will draw to our attention.

Earlier this afternoon, we heard from Tony O'Neill and his team at an Agriculture Committee meeting. They told us about some of the targets that they have set in 'Going for Growth'. They are looking at growing sales by 60% to £7 billion; growing employment by 15% to 115,000; and increasing sales outside the North by 75% to £4.5 billion by 2020. Those are very ambitious and bold targets, and they will have a very transforming effect on the industry and wider economy.

In conclusion, farming is the backbone of the communities that we rural MLAs represent, and the farmers and their families are experiencing a crisis that is not of their making. I lend my support to the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Clarke:** I have looked at the motion, and I do not find it difficult to support it. I have looked at its content and listened to what Jo-Anne said about the Ulster Unionist Party wanting to do what is right for Northern Ireland. However, if you actually look at the motion, you will see that it only asks the Minister what she has been doing. There are no suggestions in that. I find it easy to support the motion, as it stands.

I also find it easy to support the amendment and what Joe said. However, look at the amendment. Sometimes, we are in danger of building false expectations and hope for some people. The industry has had an income collapse. I am not here to compliment the Department, because you will know that that is not necessarily my form, but it has responded to some of the calls that were made recently, and I thank the Minister and the Department for that. Yes, we can criticise the Department sometimes and say that things do not happen quickly enough, but that has happened. Yes, incomes in the industry have collapsed, but so have incomes in many other industries outside of farming. That does not take away from the fact that we are here to talk about farming this evening.

I see from the motion that we are asking the Minister merely to tell us what she has done. If the Ulster Unionist Party is going to lead the way and be the farmer's champion here, I would rather see the motion tell the Minister what

needs to be done to alleviate the problem and the problems of all the farmers who are suffering, and encourage the rest of us to act. I appreciate that the farmers are suffering, given that I live in a rural constituency and know many of them. They are suffering, but the motion is not addressing any of their concerns. It merely asks what the Minister has done over the past number of months.

I also have concerns about the amendment. I support it, because it does not ask for much. However, it talks about including restricted bank credit facilities. Pardon the pun, but that is giving a blank cheque to a farmer who, in some instances, may already be struggling. That extra credit facility could be enough to finish the farmer off entirely. Are we being kind by saying that we should continually give someone extended credit facilities?

I suggest that we are not. Every case should be looked at individually. The business model should be looked at to see whether that would do the farmer justice or injustice. Adding it to the motion and saying that everyone should be given an extended credit facility does the farmer, or any business, an injustice.

**Mr Byrne:** I thank Mr Clarke for giving way. The point is that, at present, many farmers feel that they are at their credit limit. They feel that they are in a very difficult situation, with increased costs and cash flow problems. Some are begging for a little bit of leeway and time to ensure that they can get over the current fodder crisis.

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

**Mr Clarke:** I understand where the Member is coming from, which is why I can support the amendment, as it is worded. The point that I am trying to make is that leaving the wording too open could suggest that everyone should get an extended credit facility, which should never be the case. However, I accept the point, and I accept the amendment, as you have worded it, for the very reason that there is a crisis at present. In Committee earlier, we heard about the fodder crisis. I accept that because I have been getting phone calls about it, as have other Members. That is why I find myself able to support the amendment.

I must say that today's presentation from Tony O'Neill and the Agri-Food Strategy Board was, probably, one of the most encouraging that I have heard in the Committee. For the first time, I heard someone who is not directly connected

to the Department and has an inside interest in agriculture come to the Committee with a positive message. I am not sure which member pushed him on whether he believed that the Executive were getting behind these proposals, but he gave a very guarded answer. Even so, I came away with some comfort that there was a positive message in what he was trying to say. He did not put any negative spin on his response, which encouraged me that there is, possibly, light at the end of the tunnel for farmers in what the Agri-Food Strategy Board, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are doing. That is positive, and I look forward to it.

One thing that Tony O'Neill said was that he hoped that it would not take seven years. Maybe the Minister will be able to respond on how the time frames fit with the presentation that we received today and whether she sees that being rolled out in the future. Hearing something positive on this is probably the most positive thing that I can see coming from the motion. There is no point in regurgitating what happened during the winter crisis. Although there have been criticisms of the fodder package, it has already been put together and is in place. Today, the Agri-Food Strategy Board spoke about not wanting to wait for seven years and about how much it can do. Any comfort from the Minister would be positive for me and for farmers. Tony O'Neill is outside the Department. He has an interest in the agrifood sector and indirectly represents 7,000 people employed in the poultry sector.

I look forward to the Minister's response on what the Agri-Food Strategy Board said and to hearing whether she can give us any further comfort on that. Other than that, I support the motion and the amendment.

**Mr Kinahan:** I support the motion and the amendment. I will start by making it absolutely clear that the motion is a call on the Minister, not only to tell us what she has done but to act more in future on what is in the report and to do so as quickly as possible. I note that the previous Member who spoke, although he criticised us for not coming up with any ideas, did not come up with any himself.

**Mr Clarke:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Kinahan:** No. I shall carry on, thank you.

It is time, as I have said many times, that the Assembly found ways to change strategies and put them into action. This debate is really about



getting action to happen on the ground. It is no longer acceptable for action to be slow. In this case, we are talking about money, but, more importantly, about people's livelihood. That is what is at stake, and that is why we need things to happen quickly. We are very grateful for the fodder scheme and other actions, but they could have been done more quickly.

I will borrow Mr Clarke's earlier comment, which is that we have to be aware that it is not only farmers who suffer but the building trade and shops — the likes of Blockbuster, Woodside, Patton Group and many others. We need every Department to look at schemes and methods of having action plans in place for when hard times hit anyone.

**Mr Frew:** I thank the Member for giving way. You are quite right. I am steeped in the construction industry, having spent 20 years in it, so I know how the weather affects it. It also affects the fishing industry, the retail trade, in respect of footfall, and others. They all struggle, but does the Member agree that the very fact that farming has a social element to it — because it affects everybody; it affects what is on their plate, and what they eat at their kitchen table — makes it different from the construction industry and retail?

**Mr Kinahan:** Yes, I definitely agree. It is a good point well made, but I did not want to leave the Chamber having spoken just for farmers. I feel that many others are left out.

A year ago, I visited a pig farmer who had the greatest of plans. He was trying to build an indoor facility for 3,000 sows, but planning was holding it up at all levels, and the farmer was getting no help. However, what really shocked me — and this is behind many of the points in today's debate — was that the price of one of the key contents of his fodder had gone up by 450%. That is an enormous rise. If he used to pay £10,000 a year, he was now paying £45,000. That would be like a loaf of bread, which is something that is close to all our hearts, that used to cost £1.20 now costing £5.40. That sort of increase has been experienced in many areas, and that is why we have this problem today.

I urge the Minister to keep pushing the single farm payment. It needs to be paid as quickly as possible. In the past, it has taken far too long for that to happen. The CAP review is going on in Europe, and we need to make sure that the policy keeps its flexibility and is reformed in a way that helps farmers. We also need to keep pushing the agrifood industry in every way so

that we make the most of our supply line, which is quite the best.

Having got tied up in the debate on burgers and horsemeat — as education spokesman for our party, I spent 24 hours talking about burgers when, I feel, our agriculture spokesperson should have been doing that — we realise how volatile the whole system is.

As I said at the beginning, I am pushing for the Minister to act quickly and to take the actions set out in the 'Going for Growth' document as quickly as she can. I take on board the SDLP amendment, which calls for banks to be more flexible. Banks do, of course, need to be more flexible to ensure that the farmer is not killed off altogether. Therefore, we need flexibility, but, most importantly, we need this to happen speedily in order to help people.

**Mr Buchanan:** I speak in favour of the motion, which again highlights the ongoing difficulties faced by the farming community. As this is again brought to the attention of the House, I trust that the Minister and her Department will take cognisance of the severity of the situation and continue to lead in helping the hard-pressed farming industry back on to the first rung of the ladder and encourage people to rebuild their businesses.

As my colleague said, I want to hear the Minister saying what she is going to do. I take issue with the sponsors of the motion. They ask the Minister to state what she has done but do not actually put forward any suggestions to the Department about what it should do to help farmers out of this situation.

The huge decline in farm income, which fell by 50.6% in 2011, is alarming and has the potential to see many farmers go to the wall.

**Mrs Dobson:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buchanan:** Yes.

**Mrs Dobson:** The Member sits opposite me in the Agriculture Committee, so he is fully aware that I am not shy about putting forward suggestions to help the industry and farmers. So, does he accept that many of the suggestions that I have put forward, such as the capital grant scheme and others, have been taken forward?

**Mr Buchanan:** I am not going to argue that point. What we are debating is the motion before the House today. It is a pity that all those suggestions and arguments were not put into the motion, given that we now have the

opportunity to question the Minister and the Department about exactly what steps they are taking to help the hard-pressed farming community at this time.

**Mr Swann:** Will the Member give way?

**Mr Buchanan:** Yes.

**Mr Swann:** I am curious about something. When Mr Clarke spoke, it seemed that the DUP reluctantly accepted the SDLP amendment. It now seems to be almost critical of our motion. Where is the DUP amendment?

**6.00 pm**

**Mr Buchanan:** We came today to speak on a motion that was before the House. An amendment to it was tabled. We were certainly not going to re-amend it, because having a motion that is amended and then amended again does not really make for good decisions. When you propose a motion, if there are issues that you want to address, that is the time to do it. You can then put questions to the Minister.

Running a farm is more than just a job; it is a way of life. The work is constant and physically demanding. Now, more than ever, the job of the farmer is mentally demanding, with the added anguish that, despite all the hard work, the likely result is financial loss. Cash available to farming families generated by farm activity is estimated to have fallen by up to a third in 2012. The enormity of that collapse in earnings is disastrous, and it spells disaster for the future. The president of the Ulster Farmers' Union, Harry Sinclair, said that the scale of the collapse in farm incomes will leave many farmers questioning whether the food supply chain can ever deliver a sustainable income. The issue now facing farmers is just how long they will be able to continue to produce at below the cost of production. The implication of that for the economy and jobs is stark. The overall trend in agriculture in Northern Ireland over the past 10 years has seen a reduction in the number of farms and full- and part-time farmers.

As we heard today in Committee, farmers' fodder supplies are getting are very low, and many have run out completely. Livestock has been indoors for much longer than usual this year. The hopes for a good spring did not materialise. Farmers are turning to meal and straw to feed their livestock, which is putting the cost of production through the roof. That is the last thing that farmers need when the cost of

production is already outstripping the price that is paid at the farm gate.

The biggest concern for the farmer is the unfairness in the cycle from the farm gate to the supermarket shelf. Supermarkets want to be cheaper than their rivals but also have big profits. When we look down the chain to see who bears the brunt of that ruthlessness, we see that it is the farmer. There is one glaring reality when all things are considered: the farmer is being paid far too little for what he produces.

Much more needs to be done. Farming is our indigenous industry. It is the backbone of the rural economy. The farming industry is a substantial employer: in 2011, it employed 47,000 people. Food and drink processing and our farming industry is spread throughout Northern Ireland, creating jobs and wealth. It is vital that we do all that we can for the industry. Farmers are already concerned about the changes that are coming with CAP reform. That uncertainty, as well as pressure from the banks, is adding to the difficulties that farmers are facing. I support the call for initiatives to help to alleviate the pressures on farmers at this very challenging time. The Minister and the Department really need to get in there to ensure that we do not lose that major industry throughout Northern Ireland.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Buchanan:** When is the farming community going to see real benefits and see a Department that is taking the lead —

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

**Mr Buchanan:** — rather than continually reacting to crises?

**Mr Allister:** It has been rightly said in the debate that farming and farmers can be very resilient, and so they need to be. However, there is, undoubtedly, a limit to that resilience. Sometimes, in tragic ways, we see that limit in the level of suicide in the farming industry, which, of course, is reflective of huge pressure. That causes me to want to use the few moments that I have to speak particularly about the matter that was introduced by the SDLP amendment, which concerns how the banks handle our farmers. I get a little perplexed and tired of constant problems with the banks when there need not be a problem. I am referring to situations in which banks are sitting with huge

security over farm enterprises. The value of the deeds goes way beyond the farmer's indebtedness. Yet, when there is an opportunity to revisit and recall the debt and refinance it, it is taken every time to the gross disadvantage of the farmer.

I know of cases in which banks have increased, gratuitously, the charge for lending, way above the base rate and the original arrangement, in circumstances in which they have an abundance of security. Yet they take the advantage of maybe a single slippage of a repayment or a single default in some other minor way to renegotiate. That is exploitation of the farming community, and it is wrong. Happily, sometimes when you challenge the banks about it, you get some change. However, more often than not you do not.

I think that it is shameful that, in these circumstances in which farmers find themselves in extremis, there are those in the banking community who are prepared to exploit —

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** I ask the Member to bring his remarks to a close

**Mr Allister:** — and take advantage of that. That is wholly shameful.

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Obviously, this is the second motion that we have had on agriculture-related issues in the past two days. I very much welcome the focus on this very important topic.

Without getting into the events of the past year and rehearsing the details that others have raised throughout the debate, I absolutely agree with Members. The past year, 2012, was absolutely horrendous and dreadful. For all the reasons that Members have outlined, a lot of things happened that were outside the control of the industry and government, particularly around the weather and exchange rates. I do not intend to rehearse all those issues, as Members have already pointed out the reasons.

Nevertheless, steps can and have been taken to counteract and mitigate these problems. In the short term, a key consequence for farmers has been the issue of cash flow. I have taken a number of steps to address this issue, which I will outline in detail in a few minutes. In the medium term, there is the education, training and advisory work that is undertaken by CAFRE, which seeks to improve efficiency in farming. In the longer term, we are going to

have to build an industry that has the resilience to withstand the vagaries of nature and the markets and that has the ability to take advantage of the opportunities offered by a rapidly growing and more affluent world population.

I know that some Members have commented on the wording of the motion and its looking to the past. However, I want to take a minute to reflect on the supports that have been taken forward. I will then move on to future plans, the future of the industry and what we can do to support it.

First, I have brought forward, by three weeks, the payment of claims under the 2013 LFACA scheme. Members will know that that scheme contributes about £25 million a year to farmers, and, obviously, I wanted to see the money transferred to farmers as quickly as possible. Secondly, I have brought forward payments under the countryside management scheme. I am pleased to say that the first payments for the 2012 year began in April 2013, some five months earlier than last year. We will continue to make payments to farmers under the older agrienvironment schemes throughout the calendar year. Thirdly, I have decided not to apply voluntary modulation to 2013 single farm payments. Members will be aware that I have done that over the past number of months, and it will add an additional £15 million to single farm payment funding at today's exchange rate.

Of more immediate significance — many Members have referred to it — was the recent snow storm that we had during the weekend of 22 to 24 March. Members will know how difficult that was and of the extreme weather conditions that it presented to the farming community, particularly in counties Antrim and Down and other areas. At that time, the priority was to address the impact on farmers. The Department provided emergency fodder to those most in need, and my thanks go to the DARD staff and all those who volunteered during what was an extremely difficult time.

Members will also be aware that, on the back of that and to support the farming community, I moved to establish a hardship scheme that paid for the cost of collection and disposal of fallen stock. I also introduced a second element of that scheme, and I am aware that the Committee discussed some legislation relating to that today. We hope to pass that legislation through the House as quickly as possible, with payments hopefully going directly to farmers' bank accounts by the end of June. We want to roll that process out as quickly as possible and get that cash to farmers.

I will return to the issue of single farm payments. Although, as I said, I am actively introducing significant changes to our control systems, I also remain committed to doing that in a way that minimises the impact on the farming community, particularly after the challenging year that we just discussed. As of today, 97.4% of single farm payments had been made — that is over £240 million paid to the industry — and it is anticipated that the remaining inspected cases will be paid out by the end of May. I remind Members that some of the remaining claims are again sitting because of some factors outside the Department's control, particularly around some farmers not wanting to give bank account details. I take this opportunity to say again that everybody should bring forward their bank details and not miss out on a payment that they should receive.

I want to assure Members again that I am fully committed to building on the improvements that have been made this year in speeding up the processing of payments and to completing 2013 payments at the earliest practical date. However, I think that someone commented earlier that it is not just about cash. As well as addressing the cash flow issues that the farming community is experiencing, we have to look at ways in which we can help farmers to increase their profit margins in the longer term. We recognise that we cannot control the weather or the nature of all these external factors, so there needs to be a focus on issues that fall within the control of the individual farmer and the Department. So, a lot of the areas that we are involved in through the current rural development programme are around assisting farmers through the Farm Family Options programmes, which include skills training and business mentoring, and the Focus Farms programme, which looks at promoting best practice and modern technology. The more farmers who we encourage to get involved in those schemes, the more beneficial it will be for them. Other areas that we are involved in include benchmarking, the supply chain development programme and farm modernisation programme. All of those are practical ways in which we continue to assist the industry.

Some Members referred to CAP reform, on which I gave a bit of an update to the House in yesterday's debate. Things are moving forward on CAP reform, and we are, hopefully, still on target to reach an agreement by the end of June. That aim is ambitious but it is the one that we are all working towards. I will continue to be a strong voice for the local industry in all those negotiations. We have been pushing

very hard for regional flexibility, so that we can tailor supports to meet our industry's needs. We will continue that work in the time ahead. Many Members referred to the Agri-Food Strategy Board report that we published last week. I welcome the positive feedback and the fact that people are taking the opportunity to read that report. For me, that report looks to the future; it is not just a shiny document to sit on a shelf. When I secured the Executive's agreement to include looking towards this industry in the Programme for Government, the entire Executive recognised that the agrifood industry has a positive future. That is the Executive putting on record their support for this industry. So, for me, that is the vision for the future, but if we do not deal with the current challenges being posed to the farming industry, there is a shadow over that positive future. For me, that is why we have had to take all the initiatives that we have over the past year and why we have had to deal with all these issues put before us because of the weather and all the other factors.

That was our vision at the very start of this process, when the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, Arlene Foster, and I met Tony O'Neill and appointed him to that position. We put it to industry clearly: let us work together and challenge each other; go away and work with the industry and recognise that there is only one supply chain. For me, that is one of the most positive things to come out of that report. There is one supply chain. It is not farmers and then the others; it is the whole supply chain, and they are all equal partners. For me, that is one of the most positive pieces of work to come out of that report. As I said, it is not a shiny document to sit on the shelf. There can, I think, be report fatigue out there in industry and the farming community. That is not what this report is about. It is not a strategy; it is an action plan. It has clear targets for DARD, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, the Department for Employment and Learning and for the industry right across the board. It is about how we can work together collectively and challenge each other.

The £400 million ask from the Executive is, I think, doable. I look forward to working with the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Minister and the entire Executive on how we can progress that. For me, it is a doable figure. It is something that is very positive. Given the wins that we would have from that — the fact that we would create 15,000 jobs, 60% growth in turnover and 75% in export sales — it is all very positive stuff. So, I look forward to the Executive discussion on that. I also remind

Members that that £400 million from the Executive will lead to £1.3 billion of industry buy-in and investment. That is not to be sniffed at; it is a positive future. That is us, in the Executive and the Assembly, working with industry. So, that needs to be the future, but we have to deal with the existing challenges.

### 6.15 pm

I absolutely support the motion and welcome the fact that we have focused on it over the past two days. I support the amendment because I think that we need to deal with the banks and challenge them on their lending and the way in which they deal with farmers. I constantly do rounds of meetings with the banks, as do my officials. We will have to continue to do that to keep driving home the message that we need the banks to assist our farming community. The future is bright. Help them to get there. We will continue to put that message clearly to them.

Joe, the Deputy Chair of the Agriculture Committee, referred to the fact that I welcomed the announcement from the Northern Bank on the £10 million investment. I welcome that, but we need to see more. We need the banks to be flexible and lenient towards farmers who find themselves in difficult situations because of factors that are absolutely outside their control. There needs to be a bit of practical thinking. I support the motion and the amendment, and I thank the Members who tabled them.

**Mr Rogers:** I thank the Members opposite for tabling the motion. I welcome the Minister's contribution and her comment that the £400 million is "doable". Somebody referred to the fact that farming issues were being debated on two consecutive days. It is important that farming is at the heart of what we do in the Assembly because it is at the heart of the growth potential for Northern Ireland. The Balmoral show usually takes place at a time when, in rural areas, people are dealing with the first cut of silage, but in many parts of my constituency, the grass has not even started to grow.

The past 18 months will live long in the memories of many farmers, given that there was no fodder, and we had the snow crisis. We have to overcome the current difficulties to realise the industry's growth potential. Indeed, the announcement of the promise of many jobs in the agrifood sector acknowledges that. I will not go into the reduction in the total income from farming, but I will mention one little statistic about individual farm incomes, which are

expected to decrease by £10,000 to £23,000. That is a decrease of 32% per farm.

Much has been said about high inputs and high food costs. The prices of feedstuffs, fertiliser and fuel are up. Farmers' economic welfare is down, and the value of the single farm payment, which accounts for 84% of all direct payments, has gone down by 9%. When I see a dairy farmer sitting across the Chamber from me, I can start to illustrate the situation. The problem in Ireland is that we have plenty of rain. We can grow grass, but we need sunshine for decent sugar levels. If somebody like Mr Irvine, with 100 cows or whatever, has to put another 2 kg of meal into them every day, he would have to pay for an additional 6 tons of meal a month. That will put a hole in any milk cheque, even if he does get a few more pence per litre.

Cattle and sheep farmers, both lowland and upland, benefited from an increase in cattle prices, but that was insufficient to offset the combined effect of lower sheep prices, a lower single farm payment and higher inputs. Pig farmers experienced higher pig prices, but those are not enough to cover the increase in feed costs. It is a similar situation with poultry farmers. Cereal farmers and potato farmers in the horticultural industry have fallen foul of higher inputs and lower yield because of inclement weather. All that is happening in an economic downturn when banks are cutting overdraft facilities.

Mr Allister described the situation very well. The SDLP amendment recognises that restricted bank credit facilities are having a serious effect on our farmers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). I will address one of Mr Clarke's points. Tighter rules have resulted in farmers not even being able to address issues such as rural development funding because when people get 50% from the rural development fund for farm diversification, they need the other 50%. They are unable to carry out farm modernisations, unable to get loans to buy a few more acres and are forced to sell off stock at poor prices because they do not have enough feed, and they do not have the money to buy more feed. Farmers cannot seem to satisfy the banks' needs. Banks are finding every sort of excuse to refuse loans. Farmers are annoyed and frustrated by the banks' attitude and their refusal to provide finance.

Farmers and SMEs believe that they, as relatively small borrowers, are being victimised because of the people who owe millions. In fact, our farmers cannot afford to borrow. It was revealed lately that, of the £10 million

weather fund launched by the Ulster Bank in March, only £300,000 has been lent out. That is not because farmers do not need it; it is because they cannot service their existing loans, never mind increase their borrowing.

Yesterday's debate is relevant to today's motion in that all farmers are suffering. However, in many cases, hill farmers are the primary producers. Without enough product in the food chain, it will be difficult to deliver the promised agrifoods jobs.

No matter what aspect of farming you take, the farmers get hit in every way. Some of the processors at the Balmoral show were advertising the fact that they pay on the day, but not all processors do so. If there is a reduction of 2p a kilo or, in some cases, 6p a kilo, it mounts up for a trailer-load of cattle.

I want the Minister, at a later stage, to clarify whether the rural development programme budget is likely to be slashed. It is important for Northern Ireland as a source of funding for various agrienvironmental schemes as well as grant schemes such as farm diversification and farm modernisation. To put things in perspective, the Republic has a budget of £2.2 billion for 2014-2030, while Britain and Northern Ireland seem to have only twice that amount.

Farmers' penalties for non-farm-assured beef

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**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** Would the Member bring his remarks to a close.

**Mr Rogers:** Finally, we need a more robust defence of Northern Ireland farming with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in Europe and we need greater flexibility in the CAP negotiations.

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

**Mr Rogers:** We need to address the issue of the banks, and we need good support for the rural development programme.

**Mr Swann:** I thank all the Members for participating in the debate and the Minister for her reply. It has been a well-spirited debate, which has been supportive of our farming industry. As big a shock to some of the farmers as some of the other aid and financial packages out there is just to know that this place is actually listening and trying to do something for them. We do not have all the answers. I do not think the Minister has all her answers, and I do

not think her Department has all the answers, but the people in here are prepared to work to get answers and give farmers the support that they are asking for.

The motion came about because the total income from farming is down by 52.2% in the past year, from £290 million to £143 million. That was not a gradual decline; it was a complete collapse. Farm incomes are 40% below the average for the past 20 years, taking inflation and all the rest of it into account. Our industry has faced a dramatic year, and the industry out there does not see it getting any better. We are making the right noises and the right sounds, but it is about how fast we can bring forward solutions.

I welcome the presentation that we received earlier on from the Agri-Food Strategy Board. One of the most important things that Tony O'Neill mentioned was the £400 million that he hopes to get from the Executive. If he gets that over seven years, the markets may not be there in three or five years' time to help the recovery. If he gets it in one year he will be over the moon; if he gets it in two years he will be more than happy. I appreciate the Minister's comment that that is doable. I will take her at her word, because I think that she will do all that she can along with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to bring that money forward.

I do not often quote the First Minister, but at the Balmoral show he said that to some and to many, foreign direct investment is sexy. That grabs the headlines, but we must get that £400 million investment for our indigenous businesses. That is what he actually said. Agriculture is the backbone of the economy in Northern Ireland; it has been here through the good times and the bad times. We are going through some bad times right now, but that business is indigenous. It is home-grown. We are not importing people to do those jobs. They are not jobs that can be easily exported or will be exported. We are actually looking to sustain and support a way of life for people who have been on the land for generations. That is where a lot of the pressures come from. In his remarks, the Chair said that a lot of the pressures, if not all, are financial, but they are not. The pressures that I see being faced by farmers on a daily basis come from inspections, and from their age.

It has been said — I think it was even said in the debate in the House yesterday — that the average age of a farmer is 52, but that calculation does not take into consideration the men over 65 who have retired or taken their

pensions but are still farming because there is nobody else left to do it. If we take those people into account, the average age of a farmer in Northern Ireland would be something scary. It could be older than the average age of a Member here.

The other problem that we face is the issue of succession. I know that the Minister mentioned the courses that CAFRE is offering. I am reliably informed that those courses are seeing an increase in uptake. I am glad that that is happening, but if we do not get the young people suitably enthused about, and suitably paid for, the job that they are coming into, we will see a dramatic effect on our industry. That is nothing in regard to the drop in farming income.

We have farmers and farm families out there who are making businesses sustainable. Sean Rogers, in his summing-up, referred to farm business incomes dropping in the past year from £34,000 to £23,000. That is a drop of £11,000. The only reason that those farms are still making that profit is that the farmers and farm families are not taking a living wage, never mind a minimum wage, out of that. If they were taking the working minimum wage, their incomes would be far lower.

There was a campaign started a few years ago by the Ulster Farmers' Union in regard to the three Fs: feed, fertiliser and fuel. The SDLP amendment has added the fourth "F", which is finance. That is the problem that farmers are experiencing. Bank borrowing for farmers in 2012 was £821 million, up from £804 million the previous year, which is an increase £17 million. The statistical report from the Department shows that cash flow in farming dropped from £237.3 million in 2007 to £158.6 million last year, which is a reduction of 25%. That shows that farm borrowing is running five times higher than the annual cash flow in farming in Northern Ireland.

**Mr McCallister:** I am grateful to Mr Swann for giving way. Does he accept that the figures that he quotes are based purely on bank borrowing and do not include borrowing from feed companies, cash-flow difficulties and how that is funded further up the chain? That is proving even more difficult for farmers. Therefore, the figure for overall debt on farms could be significantly higher.

**Mr Swann:** Those are the realistic statistics from the situation that we are in. I am glad that the Member is here to take part in the debate on this serious issue, as it is one that he is well aware of.

The Minister and Members from her party listed the schemes that have been brought forward. Those have been reactionary schemes to the hardships that we have faced. Mr McMullan said that there are a lot of things that are outside the Department's control, but how quickly we react and how we react are well within the control of the Department and the Minister. We need to move quicker if we are really to get the agri-industry moving forward through the billions of pounds and the 15,000 new jobs that the Minister referred to earlier. If we cannot get the primary producer supported to sustain the rest of the agrifood industry, the processors and everybody else will not be able to meet that demand.

Minister, I thank you for the comments that you made earlier about the £400 million, because they were crucial. Tony O'Neill, at the Committee today, said that with finance we can move faster. If the industry is financed to the tune of the £400 million that you seem to think you can get from your Executive colleagues, I am sure that there will be plenty of entrepreneurs out there in the agriculture industry who will be willing to take that up.

I thank Members and the Minister for their input. I support the motion and the amendment.

*Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.*

*Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

*That this Assembly notes the recent publication of the 'Statistical Review of Northern Ireland Agriculture 2012' and 'Farm Incomes in Northern Ireland 2011/12'; expresses significant concern about the collapse in the total income from farming (TIFF), which fell by 50.6%, 52.2% in real terms, to £143 million compared to £290 million in 2011; notes that farmers have experienced an exceptionally difficult 12 months due to a multitude of aggravating circumstances, including restricted bank credit facilities; and therefore calls upon the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to detail the actions she has taken to alleviate the pressures which are faced by farmers and their families which are within her control.*

*Motion made:*

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

## Adjournment

### Whitemountain Quarries Hazardous Waste Transfer Site, West Belfast

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond, and all other Members who wish to speak will have approximately 10 minutes.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the matter here, which is one of huge concern in the constituency of West Belfast.

Tá mé an-bhuíoch as an seans an cheist seo a ardú, nó is cúis an-mhór buairimh é i mBéal Feirste Thiar i measc mhuintir na háite.

**6.30 pm**

It was revealed earlier this year that a planning application was submitted by Whitemountain Quarries to store and treat potentially deadly materials in its landfill site in the upper Springfield area. When that story broke, local residents, politicians and lobby groups were really concerned because the thought of hazardous waste, particularly asbestos, fills people with fear. They raised concerns with the MP for the area, Paul Maskey, and me. So Paul Maskey requested a meeting with Whitemountain Quarries, and we spoke to the company to raise the concerns and let it know that local people were alarmed at the thought that the landfill site and storage for asbestos and other hazardous waste would be located there. Beyond that, Paul Maskey, a local councillor Gerard O'Neill and I spoke to the planners, and we were very surprised to discover that the amount of storage in the application was 250 tons. We were very concerned to hear that the amount was much greater than we were originally led to believe.

I will speak about the context. Black Mountain is one of a range of mountains in the Belfast hills. It provides a stunning backdrop to the city of Belfast and is recognised as an area of natural beauty. It is a fantastic community resource and a huge tourist attraction. The other side of the story is that, as far back as anyone can remember, there has been

quarrying on the Black Mountain and, with that, health concerns for local people. There have been concerns about effects on the ecosystem and the visual impact. Over the years, there have been concerted attempts by lobbyists and campaigners to have the quarrying brought to an end. They never succeeded in ending the quarrying, but they succeeded in ensuring that restoration work was carried out, and that used inert materials to improve the visual damage. We are now faced with this situation, and those same lobbyists cannot believe that, after all the years of campaigning and having achieved the creation of a regional park, there are plans for an asbestos facility in 2013. The very mention of the word "asbestos" fills people with dread, and, even if it is stored in the way outlined in the planning application — in sealed containers — people will still feel that their safety and security are not as safeguarded as they once were.

The 'Andersonstown News', the local newspaper, has dealt extensively with the issue. One of the lobbyists, James McCabe, spoke to the 'Andersonstown News' and said:

*"All it would take for asbestos to be set free in West Belfast is air spray, human error or bad working practice that could send asbestos blowing all over this district and beyond. It could happen as easily as that and the only way to stop it beyond doubt is to scrap the plans."*

The reality is that one speck of asbestos is enough to develop into some sort of serious disease.

Tá muintir na háite iontach buartha faoi sin agus go speisialta faoin bhgairt go mbeidh aispeist lonnaithe ar an Sliabh Dubh. We have to remember that this is a densely populated area. Tens of thousands of people live just below the Black Mountain where the site is located: in Andersonstown, the Glen Road, the Colin area, the Ballymurphy area and the upper Whiterock area, and there are plans for more housing on the mountain through the Glen 10 development.

So, there is a growing population that will be affected by this.

I cannot help remembering Terry Enright, who was one of the major campaigners for the end of quarrying on the Black Mountain. Sadly, Terry passed away a few months ago. He would be shocked to hear the plans that have been put forward in the past couple of months. Terry Enright was known for bringing huge numbers of people on to the mountain,



encouraging them to enjoy it, explore it and use it as a facility for west Belfast. It is sad that, not long after Terry's death, we have this new environmental threat.

Our concerns have been expressed here today, and I am reflecting the concerns of the local residents. The MP, Paul Maskey, has requested to meet the Environment Minister several times, but he has not yet been granted a meeting. That is disappointing. Is cúis díomá é sin domhsa. It is also surprising, because the Minister has often said that he is making decisions on planning across the North; but, in his own constituency, he has, so far, not agreed to meet the local MP.

I will finish by reiterating my strong opposition to the plans to permit the storage of asbestos on the Black Mountain. Mar fhocal scoir, ba mhaith liom a rá go bhfuil mé dubh in éadan na bpleananna seo le haispeist a stóráil ar an Sliabh Dubh. I call on the Minister to use whatever influence he has to ensure that these plans are not allowed to proceed.

**Ms S Ramsey:** Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like Rosie, I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. I commend Rosie for securing the Adjournment debate. It is a very important topic, and I do not need to tell the Minister the impact that granting planning permission would have on the constituency of West Belfast.

It is appropriate that Rosie mentioned Terry Enright in her speech. I knew Terry from when I was a baby — no smart comments, it was a long time ago — and the legacy that Terry Enright and others have left behind in the constituency of West Belfast has instilled into its people a love of the environment and of the Black Mountain. I grew up in the early part of my years at the foot of the Black Mountain, and, growing up, it was just there and meant nothing until people such as Terry came along and showed us how important it was to us, as residents, to the constituency, to the environment and to our lives.

It is important that we are having this Adjournment debate, and it is also important to acknowledge that the Minister is here and to use that opportunity. He is also an MLA for the constituency, so he is well aware of the issues and of the impact of any future planning proposals that talk about either the Black Mountain or the Divis Mountain. They generate a lot of campaigns in the constituency. We need to be real about this and accept this is not just a proposal for an extension of a, b or c. It is a proposal that is not only about bringing

potentially deadly material on to the landfill site on the Upper Springfield Road but is, once again, one that erodes the Black Mountain.

In the past, we have had campaigns on quarrying that included local constituency representatives, the community and, indeed, as I said earlier, environmentalists, especially Terry Enright. When I was going over stuff for this debate, I saw a bit of information that, a number of years ago, when Joe Hendron was an MLA, he and Gerry Adams, who was the local MP, had a joint meeting with the then Environment Minister, Sam Foster, about quarrying on the Black Mountain. We need to get to this into perspective. Both parties in the constituency have concerns about quarrying, and both parties in the constituency have concerns about this proposal to bring hazardous waste on to the site.

Minister, I would appreciate it if you would take the opportunity in your address to answer some of my questions. The issue is that there was a proposal to bring this type of site to Kennedy Way a number of years ago. That proposal was opposed by almost everyone, if not everyone, in the constituency: political leaders, community leaders and residents. Thankfully, that proposal is no longer there. Now, another proposal is being brought forward by Whitemountain Quarries. Its application proposes a change of use that includes alterations and improvements to the previously approved waste transfer station to allow for the importation, storage and treatment of hazardous waste, including asbestos and other dangerous materials.

Are questions being asked as part of the application process? If they are talking about 250 tons, how will they import it to the site? Will the people of West Belfast have to deal with the fact that more lorries are coming through the constituency? If they are talking about 250 tons, how will they store it? Will it sit on that site in storage for years on end? How will it be treated? That is without even mentioning that the planning application should be knocked back from the outset.

As my colleague Rosie and I have said, the people of West Belfast have a love and an affiliation for the Black Mountain. We have fought campaigns over the years on these issues. I know that Whitemountain Quarries says that there will be no disposal of any hazardous waste on the site and that it will be used purely for storage, treatment and onward transportation. How does that fit in with the application?

The impact on health in the constituency is another concern for me, as Chair of the Health Committee, as an MLA, and as somebody who lives, works and socialises there. Throughout the years, we have heard — I accept that I have no scientific proof — about the possibility that the increase in asthma and other respiratory diseases was due to issues in and around quarrying on the mountain. First, is the Minister aware of whether any research has been done on the impact that quarrying has had on the health of the constituents of West Belfast? Secondly, does he know what the health impacts of the new proposal might be for the people of West Belfast, given that we are talking about 250 tons possibly being allowed to sit for however long — we do not know — on the site?

I appeal to the Minister in his roles as Minister of the Environment, as an MLA and as a representative of a party that has fought campaigns against the quarrying of the site to oppose and block the application, and to throw it where it should go. That should be the waste that is involved in this type of application: throw it in the bin.

**Mr Kinahan:** I will be very brief. Some of you are probably amazed and wondering why I am here. However, your constituency is just across from South Antrim. I used to be on the Belfast hills when I was a councillor in south Antrim. During my time there, I saw what a beautiful and stunning part of the world it was. I also have family links to the Andersonstown Road and the old Bass brewery, so I know the area from that point of view.

I am here to support the calls to have this properly looked at, and preferably stopped. I am also here to ask the Minister whether we could look at, in future planning, how we deal with these matters. Every single time that asbestos comes up anywhere, it gets blocked. I think that it should not even be coming before us, other than in certain areas. We should look at a way of dealing with this in our planning system that does not terrify whole communities. We have heard talk of asbestos in Mallusk. We have heard talk of asbestos at Parkgate Quarry, although I do not think that was accurate. This sort of thing comes along all the time. Most of the time, our fear is about what else is being covered up. By the time you have won your battle with asbestos and got rid of it, something else comes along that seems OK, but is not.

Our concerns are also that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's (NIEA) system for enforcing things is what no one can trust, and yet they probably should trust it. It is a good

organisation; it works as hard as it can, but, like everything in government, it is starved of resources. So I ask the Minister to give us the safety and robustness of his planning system, so that this does not happen to anyone else. I am really here to listen to the concerns of other Members and join in voicing support.

**6.45 pm**

**Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):** I thank those who participated in the debate, and I very much welcome the opportunity to comment on these issues because, as has been pointed out, I am an MLA for the constituency, and I was councillor for it. My interest and involvement in the issues of the Black Mountain go back to 1985, when I first became an elected representative. So I have probably been a representative for the area for longer than some others.

When you speak to people who come into Belfast as visitors, they comment on the scale, wonder and beauty of the setting of the city. They do not just comment on Belfast lough but on the fact that the city is surrounded by hills and mountains: Cave Hill, the Castlereagh hills, Divis and Black Mountain. That should bring it home to us. In my view, it should bring home to anyone who has a development proposal for the city of Belfast, or in the mountains and hills of Belfast, the scale, wonder and beauty of our heritage. You have no argument with me in that regard.

As Sue and others have indicated, you cannot discuss this motion without talking about those who most loved the Black Mountain: Terry Enright and Eileen Fulton, both of whom are now dead. Eileen Fulton was the founder of the Blackmountain Action Group in the 1980s. From wherever they might be, those people send a message to this Chamber tonight about what they think should happen. So, too, does Jim McCabe, whom I have met in respect of this matter. I was not aware that no meeting had been arranged with Paul Maskey. A meeting will be arranged with him, because he, I and others clearly have issues and concerns around all that.

As you will appreciate, Mr Deputy Speaker, I must put this on the record and warn myself: I speak as the Minister of the Environment where there is an ongoing process in respect of a live planning application. Therefore, I must ensure that, when it comes to any planning application, good process and good evidence prevails. I must warn myself, lest I say or do anything that derails good process or practice. If I were to do that, someone, somewhere would probably

have me or the Planning Service in court at the drop of a hat. I will not bring such a situation to bear.

I must say that the history of the quarry on the Black Mountain sends out a warning to us. The quarry on the mountain goes back many years, but the live planning application that saw the major quarry on the mountain, as far as I recall, goes back to 1979. What warning does it send us? It is that even though 19 planning conditions were laid down — I speak from memory — they were not enforced. That is why the top of the mountain was removed when it should not have been; there was quarrying where there should not have been; plant that should have been removed still sits on the side of the mountain; and environmental screening and planting was not conducted on the side of the mountain where the quarry was situated. That is the history of the quarry approval in respect of the Black Mountain.

Whatever about the decision made in the 1970s, the planning conditions were routinely not enforced. I look to the quarry owners and those responsible for minerals —

**Ms S Ramsey:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Attwood:** I will.

I look to minerals branch to send out a message to Planning Service generally about the failure to enforce what should have been enforced. The mountain should have been better protected from the ravages that befell it.

**Ms S Ramsey:** I thank the Minister for giving way, and I apologise for interrupting him. You mentioned that you remember that 19 procedures were laid down, which people should have observed in previous years.

If you can, Minister, will you send us a copy of that?

**Mr Attwood:** Yes, I can send them to you. I have them in personal files in the office. As Sue Ramsey and others indicated, there have been a number of campaigns, not just in Sam Foster's time or during devolution, but in the pre-devolution period, even to the point of the then Environment Minister, Richard Needham, travelling by helicopter onto the Black Mountain because he could not travel by car through the constituency at that time for security reasons. He visited the Black Mountain to see the issue and, subject to what he might say, my recollection is that he was very close to revoking the planning permission on the Black

Mountain because of what he saw happening to the Black Mountain. I well remember a meeting with Joe Hendron and others down the hill from here, when Richard Needham indicated that he was not going to revoke the planning permission because officials advised him that the cost of the compensation involved was so huge. I think that £60 million was mentioned at the time.

There have been great campaigns, political and otherwise, led by community people on the issues around the Black Mountain.

**Mr F McCann:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Attwood:** I will in a second. You can imagine that, although I had to step back in one way from this as planning Minister, I do not diminish or discount it, and I very much understand and share the huge concerns that have arisen about the planning application.

**Mr F McCann:** I understand what the Minister says because, with another issue, I know that it was difficult to respond to some of the questions regarding a planning application. However, in some of what you said, you highlighted again the serious difficulties and problems that there have been with planning in the past in overseeing such schemes. However, it also raises a certain arrogance with people who think that they can come into a community and work away with complete disregard for what has been laid down. It reminds me of the campaign for the demolition of the Divis flats, when people in spacesuits went in and removed asbestos while the community walked by. I remember the arguments and debates at the time, and people were told that there were two plastic sheets at the end of the building. There always has been that arrogance, and the House needs to send out a clear message that there are tens of thousands of people, as Rosie said, who live in close proximity to this, and we are not about to allow this to take place.

**Mr Attwood:** That judgement will be made on the far side of the planning process, but we have to ensure that good process governs this application, otherwise people will try to challenge an outcome because of bad process. I say that to warn myself and to advise everybody that, whatever our views — there are many, and I share many of the concerns — we have to be rigorous about making sure that good process prevails. In that regard, what are the issues around the process? The first is that, if you check the planning file on this matter, you will see that a number of

consultation responses have come back. I instructed my officials to further interrogate each and all of those consultation responses from each and all of those who responded to date as to the character and quality of those responses because, if there is anything that any of the consultees have missed, we need to know about it and we need to interrogate them further in respect of each and all of the matters that have been mentioned today and beyond those that have been mentioned today, whether that is in respect of the roads issues, the heritage issue or the tourist issues. I have instructed my officials to reinterrogate each and all of the issues around this application to ensure that, whatever the consultation responses produce, they are comprehensive and exhaustive and that no stone has been left unturned with regard to what those applications might or might not mean.

Secondly, it is my view and that of the Department that the application is wrongly described. Why? In 2006, an approval was granted for a waste treatment centre but, in my view, that planning application was never activated. Maybe the applicant claims otherwise, but my information is that that waste treatment site was never activated and, indeed, no waste licences were ever granted if any site was activated.

We told the applicant that his application for the previously approved waste transfer station had lapsed, and if he wants to take the matter forward, he has to regularise it.

Thirdly, an assessment has to be made. That reflects Members' comments this evening. Is the site the best practical environmental option for this type of facility? There is a view in the Assembly, and a unanimous view in the constituency and the local neighbourhood, that this is not the best practical environmental option for this type of facility. Furthermore, we have challenged the applicant. I will finish now because I know that time is pressing on, and I have only 10 minutes.

**Mr Principal Deputy Speaker:** The Minister was generous with his time.

**Mr Attwood:** I appreciate your generosity. We have told the applicant that, independent of whether his previous approval has lapsed, the application is not clear. The applicant states that, at any one time, he wants to process 250 tons, but it is not clear how much asbestos and other dangerous materials are included in that. We need clarity about the true ambition of the matter.

The environmental health department in Belfast City Council, which was the consultee, has said that it has no issue. I have instructed my officials to reinterrogate what has been said to us not only because of the environmental health issues but because, to date, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board is the one agency that has voiced most opposition to the proposal. Consequently, if the Tourist Board is flagging up its opposition, given the function of Belfast City Council when it comes to local tourism, it also has to assess that matter. Beyond that, because of the narrative from the Tourist Board, we will consult with the National Trust. It has an interest, given that it has use of the lands there that have been developed in recent years for public amenity purposes to advertise and demonstrate the significance of the heritage asset to the lives that people live and to tourism and employment.

I have tried to indicate the flavour of the views that I take for this application, making sure that we deploy best practice and best process. I do not think that anybody would expect any less. Jim McCabe has sent to all of us an example of what can happen — this touches on Mr McCann's comment — when a natural heritage asset is moulded and configured in a way that maximises the heritage value. His example is an old quarry in Cornwall that has been recreated as an environmental asset and is now used for open-air concerts. I am not saying that the people of West Belfast want open-air concerts because Casement Park might flag up some concerns about that, but it demonstrates that old quarries have better functions than being used as waste treatment facilities. I am not prejudging the matter, but there are better uses, as the Eden project in Cornwall demonstrates. Should that not be the scale of the ambition of those who think that quarries in Northern Ireland have purposes other than heritage ones?

*Adjourned at 6.58 pm.*





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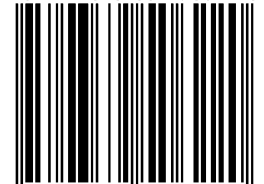
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