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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 4 December 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

Early Years: Learning to Learn

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Le do chead, a Cheann Comhairle, ba mhaith liom ráiteas a dhéanamh faoi na chéad chéimeanna eile i dtaca le hoideachas agus foghlaim do na luathbhlianta. With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the next steps for early years education and learning.

In July, I came to the Assembly to set out a clear way forward for early years. I explained at that time that the child and their needs must be the central focus of my revised proposals. I outlined my intention to proceed with a two-strand approach. The first strand would be the development of revised proposals with a clear focus on early education and learning. The second strand would involve engagement with ministerial colleagues to explore the potential for enhanced co-operation around early intervention, including early years, under the Delivering Social Change framework.

Strand one is now complete, and I am in a position to launch a new framework for early years education and learning entitled Learning to Learn, which, for the first time, sets out a clear way forward for all early years education and learning services. In developing this framework, I have carefully considered the views of a range of interest groups and concluded that the approach that I am announcing today provides a solid basis on which to move forward. I have also considered lessons learned elsewhere in early years education and have spoken with colleagues from other jurisdictions at a recent meeting of the British-Irish Council to hear the experiences of other Administrations across these islands.

Since the early years 0-6 strategy was launched in 2010, aspects of early years policy such as child-minding and day care have been realigned between my Department and the

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The starting position for reviewing the strategy is, therefore, very different. Learning to Learn will be a key building block in a suite of important education policies aimed at helping children achieve their full potential through a determined focus on raising standards and narrowing the performance gap. It aims to strengthen existing policies and programmes delivering early years education and learning services to children and families.

Since 2010, when the draft strategy was launched for consultation, my Department's investment in preschool services has increased from £73 million to £84 million. If the foundation stage is included, that figure increases to over £200 million per annum. I have made additional funds available to ensure that the availability of preschool places for 2013-14 is in line with the Programme for Government commitment to make a preschool place available for every child whose parents wish it. I have also amended the legislation on admissions arrangements for preschool to remove the priority criteria for children with a July/August birthday.

Between 2006-07 and 2011-12, the number of children in funded preschool provision increased by over 2,000. Sure Start funding has more than doubled, from £9.3 million in 2006 to £23.4 million in 2012-13, and the Sure Start developmental programme for two- to three-year-olds, which was first introduced in 2007, will be delivered to over 1,600 children in their penultimate preschool year in 2012-13. That investment and focus on protecting early years budgets demonstrates my commitment to providing a range of early education and learning services for children. I am bringing forward proposals to ensure that the early years education and learning services we have are of a high quality, are child-focused and contribute to children achieving their potential.

The goals of raising standards for all and closing the performance gap underpin the Learning to Learn framework. They are just as

relevant to education services for our youngest children as they are to older learners; in fact, maybe more so. For children in the preschool programme, their education experience lasts for 38 weeks, and the foundation stage lasts for a further two years. Delivering anything less than the highest quality of early years educational experience short-changes those children. We know that some children come to preschool and some start school already lagging behind their peers cognitively, emotionally and socially. If we do not address that in the early years, those disadvantages will accumulate, and they can impact on a child's life chances.

The overall policy aim of the Learning to Learn framework is, therefore, that all children should have opportunities to achieve their potential through high-quality early learning and education experiences. The framework is underpinned by a set of early education and learning principles that make the needs of children the key focus of provision and will shape how we plan and deliver early years education and learning services now and in the future. Those principles are that education and learning begins at birth; children and their families are entitled to high-quality and age-appropriate early years education and learning services and opportunities; the rights of children and their families should be respected; equality and inclusion are essential characteristics of quality, early years education and learning; and collaboration between key sectors and bodies will play an important part in securing improved outcomes for young children in their early years.

Sonraíonn an creat roinnt mhaith gníomhartha sainiúla le foráil oideachais do pháistí sna luathbhlianta a fheabhsú agus a neartú. The framework details specific actions to strengthen and enhance provision for children in their early years. I will highlight, briefly, some of the key actions.

The preschool education programme should be focused on children in the preschool year only. That has been a long-standing issue, and I intend to legislate as soon as possible to define the age range for the preschool education programme. Only children in their immediate preschool year will be eligible. However, I will retain a power to enable two-year-olds to access services in schools and nursery schools outside the programme. I will legislate to prevent schools establishing new or maintaining existing reception classes.

Sure Start represents a major investment for my Department. I intend to commission a review of the Sure Start programme to examine

the extent to which the investment helps to secure well-being and developmental outcomes for children and families. That will include potential options for the expansion of a two-year-old programme and a consideration of how access to services is determined.

Early years education is an important stage of education in its own right as well being essential in helping to prepare children for the transition to primary school and continuous learning. I therefore plan to extend the foundation stage curriculum to include a non-compulsory preschool year and two compulsory primary school years. That will be supported by the development of guidance and information for parents and practitioners on managing those transitions.

The thorough inspection process already in place will continue and be extended, with the principles of Every School a Good School being applied to all DE-funded early years provision. Children who may face barriers to learning because of disadvantage require particular support. I want to refocus the use of extended schools funding on nursery schools and nursery units to help to identify and address underdeveloped social, language and communication skills. I also plan to make available additional resources to voluntary and private settings in the preschool programme that meet similar criteria for extended schools funding.

In the area of quality, I am keen to draw on the existing expertise and experience in the sector. I plan to pilot early years education support clusters to help to raise standards by making greater use of the teaching expertise in nursery schools and units along with expertise in playgroups across other relevant providers and early years specialists. Additional funding will be made available to support these pilots. The role of the workforce is of fundamental importance. In my November statement, Putting Pupils First, I highlighted the importance of effective leadership and high-quality teaching. I, therefore, plan to introduce a programme of continuous professional development for preschool providers with a focus on leadership and management.

There has been a recurring issue around enrolment in nursery schools and nursery units and staff ratios. I intend to introduce some flexibility in overall enrolment numbers up to a maximum class size of 30 in certain circumstances. I will also engage directly with nursery teachers and principals on the development of pilots to test the optimum staff:pupil ratio for nursery schools and units. In

the longer term, the Department will also consider options for standardised patterns of preschool attendance as part of a wider approach to area-based planning. Until this work is complete, I do not plan to approve any new full-time provision. Following evaluation, I will consider the extension of the current pilots initiated by the review of special educational needs and inclusion. This will help to improve access to specialist support and build capacity for staff to enable them to identify and meet the special and additional educational needs of children across preschool settings. I will also seek to identify further opportunities for joint working with other Departments to improve the co-ordination of services to families.

The key role of all parents or guardians as their child's primary educator cannot be overemphasised. Indeed, I recently launched the campaign Get Involved Because Education Works to try to engage and encourage parents from all walks of life to become more involved in their child's education. I will continue to develop that initiative and will engage directly with the Health Department and other Departments under the Delivering Social Change framework led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) to support parents and help them to understand the value of education and improve the home learning environment.

The changes that I have outlined will have a significant impact on the way we manage and implement our services. Some proposals may involve a reallocation of early years funding outside the schools budget; others will require additional investment. I have already made additional funding available to early years, and I am prepared to make further funding available. In taking forward these actions, I will review existing early years budgets with a view to redistributing funding from budgets that are no longer consistent with the framework and our aims and objectives. The framework contains specific actions. When they are implemented, we will build effectively on existing good practice and enable significant further progress to be made in improving early years education provision. This will also increase the capacity for improvement and facilitate genuine engagement with parents. The statutory sector, the voluntary and community sector and the private sector all have considerable expertise and a shared commitment to and passion for early years services. Moving forward, I hope that all those sectors will be able to work together productively to deliver improvements for children and families. Although I welcome the debate on early years services, the context has changed, with aspects of early years policy

going back to DHSSPS and the emergence of the Delivering Social Change framework. The time has now come for positive action. I want all children and their families to benefit from quality services, and, today, I have set out how we can achieve this.

I know that there will be considerable interest in the Learning to Learn framework, and I, therefore, announce a further focused consultation that will end on 31 January 2013. This will provide an opportunity for key stakeholders and interested parties to consider whether the proposed actions require further refinement. I am not ignoring calls for an integrated approach to early childhood education and care for this Administration, but I am not reopening the debate about the policy aim, objectives and outcomes of the framework. We cannot hope to raise standards and narrow the gaps in performance if we remain locked in debates about strategies and take no action. The time has come to set out what I plan to do to improve the early years education and learning experiences for children.

The publication of the Learning to Learn framework represents a new and important chapter in the development of early years education. For the first time, the Department of Education's overall policy for early years education and learning is set out clearly, as are the actions that I propose to take to strengthen and develop early years services. I have already taken important steps to develop this area, and I want to see further action. Action is the key. Children have a very short period to benefit from early years education. I want every child to have the best early years experience that we can deliver, and I want families to be genuinely engaged in their child's learning and development. We should think in terms not of the child being ready for school but of our services being ready for the child.

10.45 am

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I thank the Minister for his statement.

The early years strategy has been in development for some time. Indeed, the previous Education Minister came to the House in 2006 and said that it was anticipated that the Department would be in a position to publicly consult on a draft strategy by February 2008. Here we are now almost in 2013. Progress in the Department is certainly swift and decisive.

The House needs to be aware of the feedback that was given to that consultation, when it

eventually went out. Some 2,000 responses were received, of which 1,200 were described as providing a detailed narrative. However, the Department confirmed to the Education Committee that 90% of those respondents did not agree with the aim, visions and actions under the four objectives in the strategy. Therefore, I am glad that the Minister has come to the House today and set out a number of issues, including the review of Sure Start and the provision of nursery places for schools and of more resources for voluntary and private preschool settings that meet the extended schools criteria. However, it raises a raft of questions that, no doubt, we will come to over the next number of weeks.

I want to take the Minister to one point that he made in his statement. He mentioned the:

"reallocation of early years funding allocated outside of the schools' budget".

Will the Minister clarify whether that will mean an actual reduction in primary school budgets, and will he ensure that the funds in our primary schools, which are already being stretched, are not depleted further or decimated?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his comments, and I welcome the opportunity to clarify that point. If the House got that view from the statement, I want to correct it. It certainly is not a reallocation of funds away from primary schools or post-primary. We are referring to the funding for nursery schools etc under the aggregated schools budget, which is not affected by the framework that I announced in my statement. I am looking at other areas of early years funding, and I am reviewing them to ensure that they fit in with the context of my framework today. All schools have been notified of their annual budget over the next couple of years, and today's statement will not affect that. It refers to other areas of funding for early years, which I will be reviewing. They may well fit into the framework that I announced today, but, if they do not, that funding will have to be realigned elsewhere.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I agree with him that it represents a vital and important development in early years education. Bearing in mind that the Minister referred to the fact that the framework that he announced is consistent with best practice elsewhere, can he outline the importance of learning from what is happening elsewhere and, indeed, of sharing our best practice with others?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for the question. I think it is vital that we learn from experience from across these islands and, indeed, internationally. Last weekend saw the meeting of the British-Irish Council, where Administrations from across these islands came together in Wales to discuss early years education. I found that very valuable, not only the meeting but the engagement with Ministers and their officials from elsewhere during the couple of days that we spent in Wales. I want to learn from other jurisdictions, and I want other jurisdictions to learn from us.

The Chair of the Committee rightly points out that we have been working on an early years strategy for the past number of years, but I will also point out that, during that time, things have not stood still. We have expanded our preschool services, and 23,000 to 24,000 children now benefit from preschool education. The Programme for Government makes it explicit that we now have to provide every child who wishes it with a preschool place. That will require further investment, and I made investment available this year. We also want to look at early years provision across the Executive. The Delivering Social Change framework allows us to do that. My officials and I are engaging with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and I know that other Ministers, in particular the Health Minister, are keen to get early years provision right.

I listened to the presentations from the various Administrations — Guernsey, Jersey, the Isle of Man, the South, England, Wales and so on — on how they deliver their early years services. In some aspects, we are more advanced than they are, but, in others, we should learn from them. I am particularly interested to learn about the programme for two-year-olds that is being rolled out in England. There are elements of that that I would like to see transferred across to our jurisdiction. That will require funding. I also see an opportunity in the review of the Sure Start programme for us to learn from the two-year-old programme and perhaps match it with something similar here.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome a great deal of what is in it, particularly on working with the rest of the UK, early education and learning and including parents.

I have a concern that, driven probably quite rightly by budgets, we will eventually end up with too much regulation and guidelines being forced on everyone. Will the Minister respect

the need for parental choice and flexibility and not go into too much regulation?

Mr O'Dowd: The only area of regulation in which I am really interested is ensuring that all providers, whether they be statutory, private or voluntary, are providing a high-class education service to the young people in their care. It is evident from all the research that we examined that the early years are fundamental to improving a child's educational outcomes. The most recent chief inspector's report has stated that we are making good progress on ensuring that all settings provide good education, but I want to ensure that that continues. Although I have not today set out any legislative changes relating to the inspection process, I am of the view that any setting that is open to inspection by the inspectorate should be responsible for the outcome of the report and for ensuring that, if there is a need for improvement, improvements are made. If support is required, it should be offered. However, if we get to the stage at which a voluntary or private sector provider is not improving, it should be removed from the preschool education advisory group (PEAG). As I said in my statement, it has 36 weeks with a young person in its care to provide early years education, and that should be right and proper.

I want to work and co-operate with all providers and parents out there. It currently is the case that parents put down their preference. It is not a choice but a parental preference, and we try to facilitate that as best we can. We cannot always match identically demand to provision, but we are getting better at it all the time.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the Minister's statement. I, like others, have had opportunities to witness the Sure Start and Barnardo's programmes, which are enhancing the key role of parents and giving our children the right start. What practical steps are being taken to ensure that such programmes are rolled out to a wider audience?

Mr O'Dowd: In April, I think, I announced the expansion of the Sure Start services to the top 25% most deprived wards. They are in the top 20% at the moment. Now is an optimum time to reassure ourselves that the almost £24 million that we spend annually on Sure Start is spent in the most effective and efficient way possible to deliver the services required. The principles of Sure Start are sound: early intervention and working with families and children. The two-year-old programme also provides important and essential work in communities. However, now that the

programme is there and receiving a substantial amount of public money, it is a good time to reassure ourselves, through a review, that the money is being spent in the right areas and that the right people, families and communities are receiving the support that Sure Start provides.

Mr Lunn: I also warmly welcome the Minister's statement, which is very well summed up by its last line.

I want to ask about the suggestion of co-operation in nursery provision between the various sectors. The Minister plans to pilot early years education support clusters. Does that mean that he will make an attempt to standardise the qualification levels for teachers across those sectors? Has he any plans to introduce some flexibility to the school starting age?

Mr O'Dowd: I have no plans to introduce flexibility to the school starting age at this time. I am of the view that that would require its own consultation and significant work by the Department, ESA and the boards. It covers so many areas, from the structures of our education system to parents and childcare. All those matters would have to be brought in. Therefore, it would be a piece of work on its own. The foundation stage has slightly changed the question around that. At one stage, there was a concern that we started our children at school far too young and that the education provided was not appropriate. I think that the foundation stage has reassured people that more age-appropriate education takes place in those first two years. However, I have no doubt that we will return to that question at some stage.

On your other point, the clusters are being brought together to share expertise between the statutory and non-statutory sectors. There may be one or other of the lead organisations involved; there may be a statutory body in one area and a non-statutory one in another. However, the key is that those groups are brought together and learn from each other's best experience. It is fair to say, from my experience in the Education Committee, that, at times, the relationship between the two sectors was frosty. I think that has improved, and I think that there is better work and communications between them. I believe that the idea for the clusters came from the groups themselves, and it is a good idea.

At this stage, I am not proposing to standardise qualifications in the sense that it all must be teacher-led, but I want to ensure that there is continuous professional development among

teaching staff and non-teaching staff in non-statutory sectors. I also want to ensure that the qualifications that are currently available and required are the most robust and satisfactory. We also have to give space and time to those working in the sectors to achieve further and higher qualifications, so there is a supporting role for the Department as well.

Mr Craig: I welcome the Minister's statement. I note that we are talking about the statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors working together to deliver improvement for our children. What role will the inspectorate have in ensuring high-quality delivery for our children and consistency across all sectors in that delivery? For that matter, Minister, what enforcement power does the inspectorate really have across sectors, specifically the private sector?

Mr O'Dowd: The inspectorate, by right, can inspect all settings, regardless of their status. The Every School a Good School policy relates to schools and nursery units specifically, where formal intervention programmes, etc, can be put in place. In the voluntary, community and private sectors, there are inspections, and a report can be produced and recommendations made for improvement. What if improvement does not take place? There is a duty on anyone receiving money from the Department of Education for education provision who is inspected to take cognisance and due regard of the report and to make improvements. Ultimately, if improvements are not made, they can be removed from the PEAG programme. That is the ultimate sanction. I would not want to reach that point but, if it has to be reached, we will reach it. My statement shows that early years is now an integral part of our education system; it is as integral as primary and post-primary. It is now early years, primary and post-primary, and I expect all the providers in those sectors to provide a first-class age-appropriate education to the young people they serve. There is an inspection regime and a sanctions regime for all. I will take a look at the contracts that will be signed by voluntary, community and private providers to make sure that the clause on inspection is robust enough, and, if I am of the view that it is not, I will certainly strengthen it.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's announcement to the House on introducing a programme of continuous professional development for preschool providers. As preschool provision is a short period of any child's life, will the Minister expand on the

importance of effective leadership and high-quality teaching in those early years settings?

11.00 am

Mr O'Dowd: Time and time again, across our education sectors, we have found, through local and international research, that leadership is the key to good education. The leadership of the principal and of the teacher in the classroom and, in the community and voluntary settings, the leadership of the classroom personnel are vital. It is the personnel in the classroom who are the key to improving our educational outcomes.

The cluster groups, which I spoke about with Mr Lunn, are key to continual professional development for all staff in our early years settings, and they will be key to delivering continuing professional development. I am also looking at how we can assist community and voluntary groups to provide further support, learning and training days for their staff. I will continue to examine how we can improve that further.

One of the key aspects on the way forward is the cluster groups: the sectors learning from each other; best practice being shared; and communication with each other on how we best deliver early years education to our young people.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his statement this morning. I note that he plans to put a freeze on full-time preschool provision until a standardised pattern of attendance is considered. Given extended timescales for area planning, can the Minister give some indication of the timescale for ending the freeze on new full-time preschool places?

Mr O'Dowd: The research we are dealing with dates back to 2006, and that research indicated then that there was no cognitive difference in a child's development between full-time and part-time provision. In legislation, full-time provision is four and a half hours; part-time is two and a half hours. There is a range in between those. Recently, because of budgetary constraints, I have been approving only part-time provision, but this question has always remained: what is best for the child's development? Do we need full-time provision? Do we need to extend or, maybe, change the legislation to define what full-time provision is? I want to conduct further research on that matter. That may take time; it may take upwards of a year to complete that research. That will not be affected by area planning, because, at this stage, I have not

conducted area planning in relation to nursery provision. It will be affected by the time that it takes me to commission research and for that research to be delivered back to the Department.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for his statement and welcome the fact that his strategy is now finally in place. The Minister has said that he hopes that the statutory, voluntary, community and private sectors will work together in the future. I am sure he will agree that that is key to the delivery of quality early years provision for children and their families. How soon does the Minister think that will be achieved? What specific steps is his Department taking to ensure that it is?

Mr O'Dowd: The relationship between the community, voluntary and statutory sectors has improved over the past number of years through collaboration and a better understanding of each other. It will take a bit of time to put the cluster groups in place. I would like to see it being months, rather than years; in fact, I would like to see something in place by the start of the 2013 school term, if not sooner. However, it depends on how quickly we can get them together. I am not looking to delay them any further than that. I am setting funding aside to assist them with pilot programmes, and there will be pilot programmes across the North, in both rural and urban areas. We will learn from those pilot programmes over, probably, two years, and then we will implement the best practice for them across the sectors. It is a good way forward. These people work at the coal face every day of the week; they know the best practice; they know the expertise; and they know what works in the classroom. I want them to learn from each other. It will be a way for them to develop a better relationship than in the past.

Mr McMullan: I congratulate the Minister on his statement this morning. Will the Minister reiterate the significance of early years education and why it is so vital that we get it right? Go raibh maith agat.

Mr O'Dowd: As I said, all local and international research tells us that intervention at an early stage of a child's life is one of the key elements to ensuring that that child's educational and social development is improved. We are seeing the benefits of it. The investment that we have made in early years over the past decade is now beginning to show results in our primary schools and, in the future, will show results in our post-primary schools. We do not always get it right, but we are improving dramatically

from where we were even five years ago. Early years is key to success. Today, I have set out early learning in the context of education; we will work in partnership with Executive colleagues. Delivering Social Change, which now operates under the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, will bring significant change in the level of co-operation between Departments and the levels of service being delivered to families to ensure that the early formative years of a child's life are improved and children are given the life chances to be everything that they want to be or can be in future years.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a ráitis. Ba mhaith liom a fhiafraí den Aire conas a chinnteoidh na moltaí a nocht sé anseo inniu go mbeidh áiteanna réamhscolaíochta ar fáil sna áiteanna a bhfuil siad de dhíth. I thank the Minister for his statement. How will the initiatives that he revealed today ensure that preschool places are available where they are needed?

Mr O'Dowd: Is bualadh leat an cheist. I thank the Member for the question. Today's announcement will not make school places available where they are needed. I conducted a review in 2011 to achieve that. It will be a rolling programme of work over a number of years. I am aware that the Member sponsored a debate in the Chamber a few months ago on Middletown. We are getting it right 95% of the time, but we need to get it right 100% of the time. We continue to work on matching demand with services. I have made more funding available to the education boards to provide early years places at statutory, community and voluntary and private level. A rolling programme of work will assess what services are available, assess what services we need to deliver and, most important for me as Minister, ensure that they are in the right place. There is no point in bringing development proposals to me to provide additional nursery places in areas in which they are not required, which has been the case on a number of occasions. I want to see nursery places in community and voluntary settings in the areas where they are required. We are getting better at it and are improving all the time. We have not got it right yet, but I expect an improvement this year as well.

Miss M McIlveen: I welcome the fact that there will be a consultation period on the framework, although I would have preferred a 12-week period, given that we are running into Christmas. It would be useful if the Minister

could maybe consider that. How does the framework link to the childcare strategy, specifically in relation to the research that is being undertaken to make better use of the schools estate to support childcare access and affordability?

Mr O'Dowd: I am willing to work with the childcare strategy. I am also working with Delivering Social Change. Indeed, tomorrow morning, there is a subcommittee meeting of the Executive on childcare provision that I will also be attending. I am open to discussions and flexibility. The framework that I have set out today is about early learning. It does not rule out the involvement of other strategies or using the schools estate for childcare. However, I emphasise that the early years programme is about children's development; it is not a childcare service. The consequence is that childcare is provided, but we do not send our children to primary school for childcare purposes; we send them there for personal development and education. It is the same for early years. I am trying to get the message across to parents and communities that this is about education. However, I am up for involvement in a childcare strategy. The framework does not rule that out. It will fit quite neatly into a childcare strategy, and my Department will play its role in developing that strategy.

Mr Byrne: Like others, I welcome the Minister's statement and recognise the improvements that have been made in preschool provision. In relation to the second strand, what co-operation is the Minister seeking with ministerial colleagues about improving preschool provision? Does he recognise the fact that Montessori schooling is proving quite beneficial in some areas?

Mr O'Dowd: I seek the co-operation of ministerial colleagues, as they seek my co-operation. It is now recognised by all Departments and the Executive that early intervention is key. I am acutely aware of the work of the Health Minister, and I will meet him later today to discuss further how we can co-operate with each other on early interventions from birth right through to the start of formal education.

Today, I set out a framework that encapsulates early learning. It allows for all our communities, rural and urban, to be provided with an early learning setting that will assist their children to be ready to move on to the next stage of education, which is primary school education. Therefore, if a setting fits into that framework, I

support it; if it does not, questions will have to be asked about why it is continuing. It would have to prove its benefit to early years education. The framework sets out the Department's role. If others working separately to that wish to seek public funding, they will have to prove their worth.

Mr Dallat: I also thank the Minister for his statement. In it, he says that he cannot overemphasise the need for parents to be involved in the education of their children. I am sure that everyone in the Chamber totally agrees with that, particularly if the parents were let down by the system themselves. How does the Minister propose to mark his own homework, so to speak, and evaluate the progress made in his Department and with others to ensure that we break the cycle of illiteracy and innumeracy that has plagued us for far too long?

Mr O'Dowd: We are breaking it. All the reports coming forward show that the education system is improving. It is not improving as fast as any of us would like, but there are clear step changes in educational outcomes for young people. One aspect of how we improve is the role of parents — you were right about this — particularly parents who had bad educational experiences or are from a background where, perhaps, education was not as valued as it should have been in the family home.

Recently, I launched a television advertising campaign that spoke directly to all parents, particularly those who, perhaps, are not sure how exactly they should involve themselves in their child's education. They did not have a great education themselves and so wonder, "How do I do this? I cannot do it. It is the role of a professional". It is as simple as reading your child a bedtime story; fun ways of counting with your child; talking to your child about their day at school; encouraging your child; and ensuring that your child is at school — even at primary school and preschool. All those simple steps will instil the value of education in children and assist them to develop into everything that they can be.

Early years education is, probably, one of the areas with which I am most familiar. I am the father of a seven-year-old, a four-year-old and a four-month-old, so I am going through the stages of early education and recognise the different elements of it. Most of us in the Chamber lead a very busy life. One of the best ways to relax in the evening, if you get home on time, is to sit down and read your child a bedtime story. You may be stressed out, but, when you sit down and read your child a

bedtime story, it brings a calming end to both of your days and plays an important role in your child's education. My simple message to all parents is to read to their children and talk to them about education.

Mr Allister: If the Minister wants to build a successful system, why does it have to involve dismantling existing reception classes, where the experience of many children has been positive? Is there not a danger of creating uniformity for uniformity's sake with no regard to what has been working for some?

Mr O'Dowd: It may well have worked for some, but I am not sure on what basis the Member makes that assertion. Research shows that reception classes are not offering appropriate education to the children involved. Bringing three-year-olds into primary 1 classes is not age-appropriate education. It can even stymie a child's development. Therefore, it is more important to bring age-appropriate education to primary-school children rather than just fitting them into a class or sector and saying, "We have looked after that child. They are in somewhere. Just leave them there, and they will eventually move on through the system".

Reception classes are outdated and outmoded and are not age-appropriate. They may well have worked for some, but they do not work for all. There is a better way. Let us make preschool provision available to all. Let us ensure that children have access to age-appropriate education. Then, let them move on to primary school. That is the best way forward.

11.15 am

Mr Lyttle: Parental involvement in raising educational attainment and aspiration has been mentioned. What provision will the early years framework make for training to help parents learn how best to read with their children at home?

Mr O'Dowd: As part of the advertising campaign that I launched earlier this year, back-up training material is available on the web, in libraries etc to allow parents access to the information that they require. When parents see the advertisements on the side of a bus, at bus stops, in supermarkets and, indeed, on television, they can access the relevant information quite handily and decide what is the best way for them to engage with their child. So, information is available. I intend to continue rolling out the advertisement campaign and developing the back-up material.

One of the earlier questions asked how we learn from other countries and international support. The back-up material that we have is largely from Scotland. Scotland rolled out a programme of work to enable and support parents through the provision of information. Scotland kindly shared that information with us and allowed us to use and adapt it to our own needs. So, we are now using it as well. That shows how we can co-operate with each other across these islands.

Health: Promoting Innovation

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement to the Assembly on promoting innovation in health and social care. It is timely to make such a statement this week. It is almost a year since my colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I made statements to the Assembly setting out our shared agenda for Connected Health and prosperity. It is, therefore, appropriate to now provide an update to the House on the significant progress that has been made over the past 12 months.

It is also a year since the official launch of Telemonitoring NI, our award-winning remote telemonitoring service. The service is being rolled out to thousands of patients, and an ever-increasing number of people in Northern Ireland benefit from the ability to have their long-term conditions regularly monitored from the comfort of their own home.

Recent developments in the arena of research and development and how that is used to support healthcare provide exciting possibilities for the improvement of services, as well as the life sciences sector, to the benefit of patients and the economy.

There are strong reasons why my Department and the health and social care sector should focus on supporting and encouraging those areas of development. We have the fastest growing population in the UK, as well as an unusually young population. We also have more rapid ageing of the population structure than most other regions. It is estimated that, in the 11 years from 2009 to 2020, the number of people over 75 will increase by 40% and, with that, the incidence of long-term conditions, hence the need for a radical and strategic approach to management.

At this time, we also face challenging economic circumstances, with increasingly constrained financial resources and increasing budgetary pressures. Transforming Your Care sets out clearly the challenges we face and the compelling need for change. Connected Health and innovation have key roles to play in meeting the challenges to our health and social care sector. We cannot afford to ignore the potential contribution that they can make. The reason behind my Department's joint work with Invest NI is to advance co-operation on Connected Health across the clinical, academic and industrial sectors not just to improve patient care, which is my priority, but to ensure that we maximise the economic development

opportunities that cross-sectoral collaboration can bring.

Over the past year, there have been significant milestones. The introduction of the electronic care record will improve patient safety and will enable many other developments. The Connected Health and prosperity memorandum of understanding, signed by the economy Minister and me on 6 December last year, committed to the production of a strategic action plan, which was produced in September. A core element of that plan was the establishment of a Northern Ireland Connected Health ecosystem, a forum where clinicians, researchers and industry can come together to share and develop ideas. The ecosystem was launched in September and will facilitate greater collaboration on addressing challenges in health and social care and on finding solutions. It is due to hold its second meeting later this month. Its initial focus, not surprisingly, is on how it can best support key areas of the work planned under Transforming Your Care. In addition, the recently published Northern Ireland Executive economy and jobs initiative makes a commitment to establish a group under the remit of the Connected Health and prosperity board, which my Department and Invest NI lead, to identify the economic opportunities from the health and social care sector.

There have also been developments further afield. Northern Ireland has made a number of commitments within the European innovation partnership on active and healthy ageing and has applied for candidate reference status under the initiative, which means promoting Northern Ireland as a leading region in Europe in the area of innovation to address health and social care challenges. Our involvement is providing us with the opportunity to share experiences with regions across the European Union and to work together towards the achievement of the challenging Commission target of increasing by two years the healthy life expectancy of a child born in 2020. We also work closely with partners throughout Europe and further afield through the European Connected Health Alliance, sharing learning, experiences and joint developments.

In October, I represented Northern Ireland at the EU-US eHealth Marketplace event in Boston, an opportunity to raise our profile among leaders in the field from around the world. I visited the Basque region in May this year to share experiences with my counterparts on the use of technology in health and social care and chronic condition management. That visit resulted in the agreement of a

memorandum of understanding with the Basque region formalising our plans to work together to the benefit of both regions. The Basque Health Minister and I signed the memorandum in Belfast on 22 November. That will help to build on collaboration already under way between the Basque region and the South Eastern Trust in the area of learning networks.

We already have a lot of knowledge that could extend people's healthy lives. However, there are many other things that we do not know or understand, so we need to focus on specific knowledge gaps. I am very pleased to see that, in line with the Assembly's wish to increase EU funding, clinicians across the HSC are working with academics and business to submit proposals for substantial R&D funding. A number of proposals have already been successful. I congratulate those involved on their success and encourage others to explore the potential for support of their R&D efforts.

In keeping with our aim to be at the forefront of R&D, innovation and use of technology, my Department and Invest NI are exploring opportunities for an event at the European Parliament at the end of January, including an exhibition to showcase Connected Health in Northern Ireland. In addition, the Republic of Ireland will hold the presidency of the EU in 2013. As part of the presidency, the Irish Government will host an e-health week in May. That will include a high-level e-health conference on 13 and 14 May that will run in parallel with the World of Health IT conference and exhibition. That should provide an opportunity to invite key individuals and interests attending the conference to visit Northern Ireland to see and learn at first hand how we are moving the e-health agenda forward.

Research and development plays a vital part in promoting innovation in health. In July 2012, I launched 'Evaluation of the Impact of HSC R&D Funding in Northern Ireland'. I commissioned that report on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, specifically to evaluate the benefits of research and development to the health and social care system and the wider economy. One of the most significant findings of the independent report was that every £1 invested in research and development had generated £4.14 of income in the form of further grants or other funding for clinical studies. The report recommended that Northern Ireland should contribute to the joint funding managed through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) in England. By making that investment, Northern Ireland researchers would be able to compete in selected research programmes

alongside colleagues from across the UK. For the first time, we have concrete evidence of the additional income brought in by our investment in R&D, in addition to its beneficial impact on health and social care.

My immediate response to the report was to commit to contributing to NIHR and thereby create opportunities for researchers based in Northern Ireland. We appreciate the way in which our involvement was warmly welcomed and supported by colleagues in NIHR and the Department of Health in England. Our researchers now have access to an annual funding pot of over £75 million and will be able to compete on an equal footing with researchers from other UK countries. They will also gain the opportunity to join research partnerships that could draw down larger amounts of money from other sources.

Although that investment is good news for Northern Ireland's HSC, it will also provide a timely boost for our wider economy and bring real scientific, health and economic gains. The PHA will support researchers to benefit from that new opportunity and build on the excellent work done by our current researchers. Northern Ireland has a proud history of cutting-edge research in health. The investment will help to ensure that we build on that tradition. Research is a cornerstone of reform, and innovation is a catalyst for improvement. As we move forward with Transforming Your Care, such investments will be crucial to the reform of our health and social care system.

The evaluation report also makes other recommendations that are being taken forward by the Department and the PHA. They include increased emphasis on aligning research with policy questions that we need to answer to inform the future of health and social care, as well as supporting research that addresses questions arising directly from clinical practice. We also want to provide increased opportunities for commercial development through collaboration with businesses that are based locally or elsewhere and ongoing opportunities to build further on the research findings.

I stress our underlying aim of benefiting patients through investment in maximising access to clinical trials, allowing patients access to new treatments, and through increasing knowledge in the HSC. I want to raise the profile of R&D and have it recognised as an integral part of the work of HSC organisations. However, R&D goes wider than just Health and Social Care. I want to ensure that our universities, commercial organisations and Invest NI work collaboratively

to maximise the full range of new opportunities that we have at this time. A new strategy for health and social care R&D is under development at present. I plan to launch it early next year. That overarching strategy will include the recommendations of the evaluation report and will set out the way forward.

With pressing targets to meet, it would be easy for me, as Health Minister, to focus simply on how technological developments can help to meet short-term needs and pressures. However, it is vital that we take a longer-term view. Health services generate a massive number of records, and the information stored in those records is invaluable in ensuring that every patient receives the correct treatment and care. The records can also be extremely valuable in other ways. They help politicians, policymakers, managers and health and social care professionals to plan, develop and deliver the right services to the right people. Through research on patient records, we can understand better the occurrence or spread of illnesses or find out which services or treatments are most effective for particular conditions. It is, of course, absolutely vital that patient confidentiality is respected. Northern Ireland has high-quality systems in place for the safe and secure storage of patients' confidential healthcare records. However, it is possible to respect that and still gain the great benefits that R&D can offer by using data that is anonymised and cannot be tracked back to an individual patient. I recognise that, locally, we need to make changes so that the right people can gain access to anonymised records. In common with partner health Departments across the UK, officials are putting in place a new system that will provide access while maintaining patient confidentiality and anonymity. We call it an honest broker service. It will provide a robust process to support the safe and secure sharing of anonymised health information to support ethically approved health and social care-related research.

It is not only for our own planning purposes that access to data is vital; researchers and business will dedicate their resources to health only if they feel that they will get the co-operation and support that they need to achieve their goals, including product development. That is partly economic support, but it is more than that: it is the co-operation of clinicians in explaining their needs; it is access to the data that they need for research; and it is co-operation in the trial stage of product development. Interestingly, the very technological developments that come out of research allow us to collect data electronically with more efficiency and effectiveness than

ever before. Therefore, it is appropriate to ensure that that data can be used to benefit the individuals from whom it was collected, in the overall interest of public health and the development of health-related policy. As I have outlined, the information also has the potential, with appropriate safeguards, to support economic development.

I have provided an update on the developments in Connected Health, research and development and promoting innovation since my statement a year ago. It is an important and fast-changing area for our health service. Northern Ireland has much to offer in those areas and much to gain. We must, therefore, continue to build on the significant progress that has already been made. I commend the statement to the House.

11.30 am

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is national R&D money available to the Northern Ireland health service through the small business initiative, which we have recently been made aware of through the Enterprise, Trade and Investment (ETI) Committee?

Mr Poots: We can apply for money from a range of areas. One of the more recent ones is the National Institute for Health Research, which has a funding pot of £75 million. Our universities believe that they are well placed to get considerably more than the £2 million investment that we have put in. Also, the opportunity for collaboration with other universities across the UK will lever in considerably more money from other sources. Outside of that, there are other opportunities for investment in innovation, locally, nationally and, indeed, at European level. It is our task to ensure that we maximise the ability of our key research teams, universities and businesses to be able to access such funding and lever in additional investment from elsewhere.

On a very positive note, in the past few weeks one of the largest pharmaceutical companies has actually agreed to establish a base in Northern Ireland. We are seeing Northern Ireland being noticed by people who have a really major contribution to make in health and social care research.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for his statement. I commend the officers and the Minister himself for the initiative that they have shown in driving this forward. As the Minister will well know, the rolling out of e-health

technology will require good broadband coverage across the North. There are still pockets that do not have access — or not good access — to broadband. Will the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with the ETI and Agriculture and Rural Development Ministers in relation to ensuring coverage throughout?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. She is right. There are pockets in Northern Ireland where broadband availability is not good, but they are pockets. Northern Ireland is one of the most advanced regions in its availability of broadband to the general public. I have been to other places where they are absolutely amazed that in Northern Ireland we have superhighways running between our towns and villages, whilst their technology virtually has single-track lanes. We are in a position of advantage in all this, because of the good broadband services that we have. I know that the ETI Minister is continuing to work with communities where broadband is still a problem, one of which is in my constituency. I will continue to encourage her to find solutions for the small number of pockets that exist.

Mr McCarthy: In his statement, the Minister spoke of the overarching strategy, which will include the recommendations of the evaluation report and will set out the way forward. The Minister stated that there have been developments further afield, namely in the Basque region and Boston. The Minister will be aware that, as we speak, the Chair and Deputy Chair of the Health Committee are visiting Cuba to see how it provides the best healthcare in the world.

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

Mr McCarthy: I am coming to the question.

Will their report, made when they return, be factored in to the Minister's evaluation report and strategy, to be launched, as he states, early next year?

Mr Poots: I will certainly be very happy to listen to what the Chair and Deputy Chair have to say. I always listen to what the Chair and Deputy Chair have to say when it comes to health matters. I greatly appreciate the support that they give and the information they provide. I suspect one thing they probably will find in Cuba is that huge amounts of money are being pumped in from Venezuela, through the Hugo Chávez regime, to support the health service in Cuba. Consequently, the people in Venezuela

have not seen the benefit of being such an oil-rich country. Many of those people are impoverished, because Mr Chávez offers such support to the Cuban regime.

Mr G Robinson: Can the security of patient data really be guaranteed?

Mr Poots: To make progress, it is absolutely essential that that is the case. Were such data to fall into the wrong hands, the public would be reluctant and reticent for it to be used. An honest-broker system will provide a robust process to support the safe and secure sharing of anonymised health information in ethically approved health-related research. Non-anonymised data is released only when a patient has given fully informed consent in advance — for instance, when he or she has chosen to be part of an organised clinical trial. In all that, we would not ask patients for the opportunity to use their information to advance health and social care unless we were absolutely confident that we could keep their details anonymous and, therefore, without any impact on their personal lives.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his statement and congratulate him for his accomplishments to date. Does he agree that he must now, as a matter of priority, address the fact that Northern Ireland has the highest non-attendance rate in the United Kingdom for clinical appointments, and does he agree that using short message services technology should be used to tackle that problem?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, in his own area, the Southern Trust received two national awards last year for moving forward in innovation, and it has been particularly to the fore in telemonitoring. I agree that we have all sorts of communication methods that we must use to maximum effect to ensure that we get full efficiency in our health and social care system. Certainly, the methods that the Member referred to are widely used in a range of fields, and we are happy that that is also the case in the health service. It would be positive to continue to drive that forward and ensure that the number of people missing appointments is reduced.

Mr Beggs: Telemonitoring has been used in Northern Ireland for over a year, so will the Minister give us an update on the range of conditions that are deemed suitable for its use and the feedback from patients, GPs and consultants?

Mr Poots: Up to mid-November, approximately 2,500 people in Northern Ireland had benefited from remote telemonitoring since its introduction, around half of those since the regional contract was put in place. We have 124 who have been referred and await its installation.

Telemonitoring is a means of reading vital signs and passing them to the central database, which will demonstrate whether there is stress. Telemonitoring can be of significant benefit for conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema, diabetes and circulatory issues. Those records can come to the central database and, when there are those signs of stress, be dispensed very quickly to a district nurse, who can take action.

I called on a gentleman in Larne, in the Member's constituency, who is suffering from COPD. He indicated that, in, I think, the previous two years, he had had approximately 12 attendances at Antrim A&E and had been admitted to hospital a number of times. Since going onto telemonitoring, I think that he had had one attendance at A&E. That demonstrates its effectiveness, particularly, in this gentleman's case, for COPD.

Ms Brown: I welcome the Minister's statement. What proof is there that telemonitoring is cost-effective?

Mr Poots: Before we decided to invest, a whole system demonstrator evaluation conducted in England highlighted the positive impact of telemonitoring on reducing A&E visits, emergency admissions, elective admissions and bed days. It also highlighted a reduction in tariff costs, although the use of tariffs is specific to the NHS funding system that operates in England.

Increasingly, the evidence from other large-scale studies internationally highlights the cost-effectiveness of telemonitoring, including the example of the Veterans Association, where a large-scale programme has reported a 25% reduction in bed days. I believe that Northern Ireland will be in a leading position to inform other EU countries on telemonitoring. That is why we have applied for regional status. If accepted by the European Union, we will be a reference site. Currently, the EU is looking for five or six reference sites. If we gain that status, it will place Northern Ireland as a leader in health innovation in Europe, and others will look to our example. We should not underestimate the powerful contribution that we

can make to health and social care, not just in Northern Ireland but beyond these shores.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. He said that, over the next few years, the ageing population will increase by 40%. I am sure that the Minister will agree that that age group could benefit enormously from telemonitoring. How will the Minister ensure that this programme comes to their attention, and what support will they have to ensure that they take full advantage of telemonitoring for their particular health conditions?

Mr Poots: This will be conducted through GPs and in association with the trusts. At present, some trusts are more effective than others, so we need to encourage everyone to get involved. The money is set aside to do that, and the capability is there to do it. The uptake has been good, and we would like to continue to maintain and even build on the momentum to ensure that we fully benefit from the investment being made here. We want to ensure that people with chronic conditions, particularly older people, can receive that support. We want to ensure that they do not end up in hospital because their condition has been allowed to deteriorate to that extent.

Committee Business

Unadopted Roads: Committee for Regional Development Report

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 15 minutes to propose the motion and 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into unadopted roads in Northern Ireland (NIA 44/11/15); and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Tá mé sásta an rún ar an tuairisc a thabhairt os comhair an Tí inniu ar son Chathaoirleach agus baill an Choiste Forbartha Réigiúnaí. I am pleased to bring the report to the House today on behalf of the Chair and members of the Committee for Regional Development. I pass on my best wishes to Jimmy, the Chair, who is recovering.

The Committee first received a presentation on the increasing number of unadopted roads in the North of Ireland from NILGA on 18 January 2012. Following that presentation, the Committee agreed to undertake an inquiry into unadopted roads. It has been a lengthy process, during which time the Committee heard some horrific stories of residents of unfinished housing developments being left liable for thousands of pounds because roads or sewers were unfinished and unadopted.

I should state at the outset that the Committee is sympathetic to developers who find themselves struggling in very testing economic times. The recommendations contained in the report are not intended as a criticism of contractors. Rather, the Committee believes them to be pragmatic recommendations aimed at ensuring that consumers are afforded greater protection. I hope that the Minister and other Members will agree with the Committee on that point.

11.45 am

During the inquiry, the Committee was advised that there were anything between 1,200 and 3,500 unadopted roads and some 1,200 sewerage schemes in backlog. The Department for Regional Development (DRD) and NI Water are unable to quantify the precise numbers, which the Committee believed was a serious weakness in itself.

Recommendations to negate that weakness have been made and are detailed later in the report. It was also estimated that it would take some £300 million to bring roads up to a standard that is sufficient to allow for adoption and somewhere between £41 million and £100 million to allow for the adoption of sewerage and wastewater schemes.

As could be expected in today's economic climate, it is extremely unlikely that those levels of investment could be acquired from central government. The Committee is not suggesting that actions cannot be taken to rectify this significant problem; rather, it believes that a co-ordinated effort by all sectors involved in the process could see major improvements in the most critical cases.

I want to discuss the inquiry's main findings. As I said, the Department and NI Water are not in a position to quantify either the extent of unadopted roads and sewers or the cost of the remedial works that are necessary to rectify the problem. NILGA brought that issue to the Committee, and, during the inquiry, the Committee received a significant amount of evidence from individuals and local councillors of the devastating effects that unadopted roads and sewers can have on residents and their properties.

The resources that are required to undertake the righting of all defects are not available. However, the Committee does not believe that this should be the end of the matter, and it recommends that NILGA co-ordinate a prioritisation audit in each council area. Such an audit should list the numbers of unadopted infrastructures and apply an agreed grading that is based on the risks to public health and safety. That would allow for priority-based intervention bids by the Department and/or NI Water, should sufficient resources be made available.

Having briefly mentioned resources, I want to discuss the bond. Prior to the separation of Water Service and the Department in 2006, roads and sewers were legislated for in the Private Streets Order 1980. A number of respondents, particularly those from the

construction industry, raised concerns that, as a result of that segregation, there was a requirement for two bonds, one each for roads and sewers. The industry and bond providers claimed that, when there was one piece of legislation, the cost of providing dual coverage had risen to £7,500 from approximately £3,000. Although the Committee does not wish to prohibit recovery in the construction industry, it has received sufficient evidence to indicate that the level of bond coverage is insufficient to cover remedial works that might be required to bring infrastructures to a standard where they could be adopted.

In addition, given that the process for calling in the bond can take a significant period of time, it is often the case that costs have been increased by a compounded inflationary figure. That has the significant potential to expose the statutory authorities and, ultimately, the taxpayer to that burden. The Committee recommends, therefore, that statutory providers and representatives of the construction and financial sectors agree a bond level that is acceptable to all parties and that includes an inflationary amount.

As indicated, the process for triggering the bond is lengthy and complex, particularly where a developer has gone into liquidation. There are a number of occasions when the statutory bodies have not been advised that a developer is in liquidation until a significant period of time passed. The Committee is also not content that the Department is waiting for up to 18 months after a developer has received the preliminary certificate. The Committee believes that, although not intentional by the Department, the process does not take into account the very significant risk of residents' safety, aside from the major inconvenience caused. The Committee recommends that the Department review its procedures with a view to ensuring that there is a more prompt reaction to calling in the bond. The process should be aimed at alleviating public health and safety risks to residents.

The primary pieces of legislation for the adoption of roads and sewers are as follows: the Private Streets Order 1980; the Private Streets (Amendment) Order 1992; and the Water and Sewerage Services Order 2006. The Committee was concerned that the legislation is outdated, being 30 years old and 20 years old respectively. Members were also concerned that the principles of the orders do not adequately recognise the current economic circumstances or those of the consumer.

The Committee is also extremely concerned that there is no mandatory requirement in the

2006 order for a developer to submit a drainage plan to building control or even enter into an agreement with NIW over a bond. The Committee considers those to be major flaws that need to be redressed urgently.

We considered the merits of having one order to consolidate the legislation. However, the Committee is mindful of the fact that there is a degree of urgency with the review of the legislation and is content to recommend that the Minister urgently review the private streets legislation to ensure that it has adequate measures to deal with the increasing occurrences of unadopted roads.

In addition, the Committee recommends that the 2006 order be reviewed to bring it into line with the Private Streets Order to provide detailed plans to Building Control and close the loophole through which a developer can choose whether to enter into a bond agreement.

In all our deliberations, protection of the consumer — the resident — was to the fore. A number of respondents raised concerns about the level of detail contained in the property certificate, particularly the absence of adequate information on the condition of roads and sewers. That would potentially have an adverse impact on vendors should the property be resold. In addition, there were complaints that, although the Department could be contacted frequently by developers and the legal profession, those dealing with the real impact of unadopted infrastructures — the residents — were not afforded the same access and were not privy to the same level of information.

The Committee believes that the onus to identify potential issues lies with the legal profession and is best carried out during its searches in respect of the resale of properties. The Committee recommends therefore that the property certificate should be adapted to include legal opinion on the condition of the roads and sewers and whether they have been adopted. It should advise potential vendors of the consequences that non-adoption will have for them. The Committee recommends that the legal profession, in conjunction with other stakeholders, compile a guide for vendors that will include information on, for example, their rights and entitlements, resolution techniques and dealing with administration and/or bonding services.

Consumers must be afforded an opportunity to access and challenge government bodies in the same way as developers and the legal profession. The Committee believes that if an

appropriate system were in place, the Department and/or NI Water could adapt it to aid in the quicker triggering of the bond enforcement processes. The Committee recommends therefore that a code of practice or protocol be compiled advising of the structures in place, or being put in place, to effect the prompt triggering of bond enforcement.

The Committee was struck by the number of organisations and stakeholders involved in the process, from construction to residents, and, in very many cases, beyond that. The Committee was also cognisant that each stakeholder had its own agenda and that a collective view of, or challenge to, the problem was not particularly evident. The Committee believes therefore that a greater degree of co-ordination and co-operation is required to address the problems associated with unadopted roads and sewers.

The Committee recommends that a co-operation forum is established to agree how the issue of unadopted roads and sewers can be dealt with collectively. Without being prescriptive, it should be representative of residents, statutory and local government bodies, contractors, bonds services and the legal profession. The Committee suggests that the body define its own terms of reference but that it may wish to establish the level of bonds, compile codes of practice, protocols and information packs, and assess whether the current and future legislative provisions are sufficient.

I am sure that, during the debate, Members will recount individual instances of unadopted roads and sewers in their own constituencies. That will provide further evidence that urgent action is needed to address the situation. We are sympathetic to developers and the construction industry and want to see that important sector revitalised. That is why we fully support the Executive's efforts to bolster the construction industry through investment in, for example, major road infrastructure projects. However, we must also remember that the people who put us in this place are the very people who, through no fault of their own, are being faced with liabilities running into tens of thousands of pounds; who must drag their refuse 200 yards for collection; and who purchased their properties in good faith. They are the people who the inquiry seeks to put first. They are the people who should be put first. They are the people who I believe the Committee has put first in making these recommendations.

I move the motion and hope that the House supports the Committee for Regional

Development in its efforts to protect the consumer.

Mr I McCrea: I welcome the debate. I welcome the Minister and thank him for attending. I look forward to hearing what he has to say in response to the debate. I join the Deputy Chair in commending the Committee on the time that it spent working on this inquiry. Most importantly, it would be remiss of me not to refer to the Committee Clerk and the staff under him who had the hard job of putting all this together and trying to guide the Committee through the process. We are thankful for that.

As the Deputy Chair highlighted, we had evidence sessions with a number of different organisations as part of our inquiry. We received quite a number of responses from councils across Northern Ireland. No one will be surprised to hear that one of those was from Cookstown District Council, of which I am a member. At the time of the report, there were around 3,148 roads that were determined for adoption but had not yet been adopted. Of those, 107 were in Cookstown and 99 were in Magherafelt. I will not bore the House by going through each of the 107 in Cookstown and 99 in Magherafelt, but the Minister will be more than aware of them. I hope that those numbers will become a lot smaller in the not too distant future.

The issues raised in response to the inquiry were pretty much the same from council to council. It is important that we highlight some of those today.

12.00 noon

The main issue, which will not surprise anyone, was refuse collection. In many areas, insurance was a major problem for councils, because companies either refused or put high premiums on vehicles entering unadopted roads. As the Deputy Chair said, that brings the problem where councils decide that they can no longer enter a development that has an unadopted road. The result of that is that people have to bring their bins to the edge of their estate, which has health and safety implications. Those people have purchased their homes, and they pay the same rates as those who get their bins collected, yet they feel that they are, on many occasions, treated as second-class citizens.

There are many recommendations. I will not go through them; they are detailed in the report. I have read the Minister's initial response to the recommendations. I give credit where it is due,

and I welcome the Minister's response. It is important that we change the way things are and ensure that bonds are used much more quickly than they have been, more so in developments where the developers have gone bankrupt and have left the estates in a mess. It is important that we get around that issue.

As a member of the Committee, I look forward to working with the Minister as we move forward on this issue. I assure him that I and my party will not be found wanting when it comes to trying to move this thing forward.

Mr Hussey: I begin by pointing out that I joined the Committee on 23 April 2012, and you will note how hard they have worked since then.

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak about the Committee's inquiry into unadopted roads in Northern Ireland. Anyone who has a background in local government will know that this particular issue causes many headaches for those who have bought houses in developments where the roads have not been adopted and, consequently, bins are not collected by the local council from the estate but from the nearest public road. In my constituency of West Tyrone, we have 146 unadopted roads.

Our recommendations are not overly complex, but they attempt to assist the Minister and his Department by bringing some of the long-standing issues to a head and trying to provide a framework by which we can move forward. Clearly, this problem has been about for a long time, and it predates the appointment of the current Minister. I thank the Minister for his support to the Committee.

On 7 February 2012, he stated:

"I recognise the concerns of local home owners who find themselves in new housing developments, where developers have left roads and sewerage systems unfinished. Roads Service and NI Water are making use of the current legislation and procedures to address these problems but this process takes time to complete ... I will ensure Roads Service and NI Water officials are available to the Committee throughout their inquiry process."

There is no doubt that the Minister and his team did that.

As someone who has a background in financial services, I am well aware that the cost of a bond is based on the financial risk that the financial institution granting the bond has to

undertake. We seem to have been reluctant to enforce bonds. In my time as a councillor, I found it very frustrating, when attempting to push for a resolution, that Roads Service seemed to be reluctant to force the hand of the developer in relation to the bond. For that reason, I welcome the recommendation that the Department review its procedures with a view to ensuring a more prompt reaction to calling in the bond. That process should be aimed at alleviating public health and safety risks to residents.

In conjunction with that recommendation, it makes sense to follow with a further recommendation for a code of practice or a protocol to be compiled, advising of the structures that are in place to effect the prompt triggering of bond enforcement.

Obviously, because of time constraints, I cannot and, I am sure you will be relieved to hear, will not be going through all the recommendations. I fully support all the recommendations, but priority must be given to our recommendation for a prioritisation audit to be done in each council area. That must be completed as quickly as possible, and the process of priority-based intervention must be implemented as soon as funds become available.

Many of us have problems in our constituencies with unadopted roads. They are in various villages and towns, where people are concerned that their home is no longer their home because of problems on the roads or in the sewerage infrastructure. That was fully evident in our report and our inquiry. Overall, I welcome the report and urge its implementation as soon as possible.

Mr Dallat: I am delighted to speak on the report today, and my first thoughts are with our Chairman, Jimmy Spratt. Jimmy, if you are looking in — I am sure that you are — I assure you that the absence of Members does not indicate a lack of interest in the report, which affects every part of Northern Ireland.

When the report was drawn up, it set out five key objectives, and I believe that it has achieved them. The first objective was to put a cost on bringing roads and sewers up to an acceptable standard, and my sympathy goes out to the Minister because of the money that he needs to find to ensure that that happens. Members will agree that the concept of a voluntary undertaking or agreement has not worked. Time and time again, Members get the runaround when trying to find out who is responsible for a particular problem. That needs to end, and we need to find a solution,

arising out of the report, to put an end to that. The report sets out good reasons for dramatic changes that will compel property sellers to provide the most detailed information not only on the property but on the whole network of sewers and roads in the vicinity. Very often, the problem may not be at someone's own doorstep but may be further down the road. I am sure that most Members know of such cases.

The issue of unadopted roads and sewers has probably been about since Roman times. I am sure that some historian will point out that the issue goes back long before that. I suggest that the time has come to put an end to it, and, quite frankly, I do not see that happening without new legislation to enforce particular procedures to ensure that it happens. The recent downturn in the property market here and in the Republic has brought to a head the absolute urgency of putting the issue in focus. I can think of one terrible incident in the Republic in which a child was drowned on a site that was not completed. I am not aware of anything like that in the North, and, please God, that it will not happen.

During our fact finding, we met a lot of people, and one of the most tetchy — if I can use that word — meetings was with the Law Society, at which we indicated that we believed that its members should be made more amenable to their involvement in conveyancing and should ensure that all the services that are supposed to be in place are in place. From correspondence with the Law Society, I know that it was not too happy about that, but all Members here will agree that there is an onus on solicitors, most of whom carry out their work exceptionally well and professionally. However, a few have made big bucks out of property and have not delivered, and I have no doubt that Members around the Chamber are then left with the task of trying to unravel what has been left as unfinished business, which is sometimes not easy.

I have no doubt that the Assembly will adopt the report, but I have one concern about the resources that are needed to address the problems it highlights. As I said earlier, the Minister will have our full support in ensuring that those unfinished estates and faulty sewers, some of which have been giving problems for years on end, can be addressed in a new way. If we do that during the lifetime of this Assembly mandate, we can claim success, despite the fact that not many Members turned up for the debate.

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

Mr Dickson: I welcome the report, and I place on record my thanks to fellow members of the Committee for Regional Development and, in particular, to the Clerk, staff and all who contributed to what I consider to be an excellent report. Indeed, this is an effective example of democracy at work. A problem was highlighted, and the Committee has investigated and made recommendations to help to remedy what is a genuine situation for many people. We now look forward in anticipation to the response of the Minister and the Department.

That our report's estimate of the number of unadopted roads is anywhere between 1,200 and 3,500 speaks for itself about the level of uncertainty surrounding the issue. It also highlights neglect and the fact that there has been no concerted effort thus far to co-ordinate a large-scale, multi-agency response to the problem. The scale is immense. We are told to never say never in politics, at least most of us are, but, at a cost of between £340 million and £400 million, it is very tempting to say that there is no chance that the Assembly will pay to bring all affected roads and sewers up to adoption standard, particularly given the absolutely dire financial situation that already affects, for example, our water and sewerage infrastructure and services.

With this in mind, the Committee's very sensible recommendation is that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) co-ordinate and prioritise an audit to allow for the possibility that the unadopted roads and infrastructure causing risks to public health and safety could be addressed by the Department and/or Northern Ireland Water (NIW). This is, in my view, a sensible way for us to try to deal with the existing problems. If investment is forthcoming from either of these sources, it is appropriate that priority be given to areas causing the most harm and damage.

We could also benefit from better co-operation and awareness from all parties involved. We, too, were told of examples of Northern Ireland Water not being formally notified when a developer goes into administration. We were also informed that it may enter into property agreements, unaware of the status of roads and sewers and the consequences of non-adoption. It seems that greater awareness from and contact between the stakeholders could help significantly, so the recommendations set out in points 21, 22 and 24 are particularly welcome.

We must also look forward to putting in place legislation and measures to prevent the appearance of many more unadopted roads and structures. It is very concerning that there

is no mandatory requirement in the Water and Sewerage Services Order (Northern Ireland) 2006 for the developer to submit a drainage plan to Building Control or to enter into an agreement with Northern Ireland Water in respect of a bond. Moreover, we note that the Private Streets (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 does not adequately recognise the current economic circumstances or those of the consumer. There are major flaws that need to be addressed urgently. Perhaps they could have been dealt with in the upcoming water Bill had there been more forward thinking from the Department, but it is clear that there is a strong case for legislative change, so I encourage the Minister to bring forward proposals as soon as possible to address the legislative failings identified in the report.

The Assembly and the Executive have a duty to assist those affected by the economic downturn where they can. The Committee has made clear recommendations to assist all of those affected or potentially affected by the problem of unadopted roads across Northern Ireland. As a member of the Committee, I support these recommendations. I urge Members in the Chamber to support them, and, in particular, I urge the Minister to act on them as soon as possible.

Mr Easton: In Northern Ireland today, there are a number of unadopted roads. This has a dramatic impact on the residents of unfinished developments and on the reputation of the building trade. A balancing act needs to be achieved between the householder, who often innocently faces the consequences of residing in a development with an unadopted road, and the builders, who report a substantial rise in the cost of the required bonds. Obviously, in these tough economic times that extra financial burden can have a significant impact on a struggling sector.

12.15 pm

An unadopted road is defined as one where a bond has been put in place and one about which the Department is not satisfied that the street has been levelled, paved, channelled, made good and lighted. Obviously, if a road is not deemed to have met those criteria, that will have a serious impact on residents. There have been cases where residents have been unaware that, if they live on an unadopted road and repairs need to be made to the sewerage system, they are responsible both for ensuring that those repairs are completed and for their cost. If the street is not properly maintained and built, there are dangers to personal safety,

especially where street lighting in the dark winter months is concerned.

There are also issues surrounding what happens when homeowners want to sell their property and move on to pastures new. Prospective house buyers may receive legal advice not to purchase property on unadopted roads, and that can have a serious impact on innocent homeowners who are not experts in the field and who have purchased houses in good faith.

I believe strongly that the vast majority of builders in Northern Ireland want to do their best for the future residents of the homes and business premises that they construct. In the construction trade, personal reputation is often a builder's best asset in securing future work. After all, Northern Ireland can be very small place, and bad news often travels faster than good. For that reason, I believe that our good builders should be supported in their endeavours in this difficult economic time.

Since 2006, when the bond system was split into two separate bond requirements, the cost has risen from approximately £3,000 to £7,500. Against that rise, however, there is also a concern that often the bond level is not sufficient to cover the work that is required to bring the infrastructure to a state where it can be adopted. A balance needs to be achieved in such a situation, and I believe that the report allows for that avenue to be explored further.

I support the report's recommendations, and I believe that, by implementing them and ensuring that there are closer working relationships between consumers, builders and local and regional authorities, we can continue to be confident in the construction industry. I particularly welcome the closing of legal loopholes and the extension of property certificates to cover the condition of roads and sewerage. Those certificates are very important in protecting the consumer. The re-examination of the level of the bond and the burden that it places on builders at this time is also extremely welcome. It will allow for dialogue to begin between those who are completing the work and those who have to pay when things ultimately go wrong. I also appreciate that the proposed register, along with the recommended grading of the most serious problems, will allow local authorities to address the most serious and dangerous situations as a priority.

I support the report.

Mr McAleer: Thank you, a Cheann Comhairle. I take the opportunity to support the motion. I commend the Committee and the officials, particularly Paul, Nathan, Tara and Alison and all the others who were involved in initiating this hugely important report into unadopted roads and housing developments.

As I found out, this is a very complex and multifaceted issue, and I am glad to note that the report's recommendations avoid attributing blame. Their thrust aims to achieve a consensus among all the relevant parties.

From dealing with residents, I know how frustrating it can be. People purchase a new home. They take great care of and pride in that home, but that is completely undermined by the fact that their home is in the middle of an unfinished site, where there is no street lighting, manhole lids protrude and the sewerage system is not complete. They may have the added complication of bin lorries being unable to enter the development for insurance reasons. Coupled with that, the economic downturn has had a hugely adverse impact on our construction and building industry. Unfortunately, many of the developers of those unfinished sites have gone into liquidation and do not have the means to complete the sites to a standard that is fit for adoption.

Adopted roads and developments are legislated for under the Private Streets Order. I support the report's finding that the Order is outdated and in need of review. As was mentioned, there is a major flaw in it that means that developers do not have to submit a drainage plan or enter into an agreement with NI Water. As John Dallat said, that can have major public health implications, so it is imperative that the Water and Sewerage Services Order is brought into line with the Private Streets Order 1980.

Planning Service also has a very important role to play, particularly to ensure that all the conditions are met for sewers, rivers and roads. I consider it a major legislative flaw that a developer can get permission to start a new development even if its previous project has not been completed. I can imagine how frustrating it must be for a homeowner who has been living for years on an unfinished site to watch while the same developer starts work on a new site up the road. In many ways, the loophole has allowed a small number of repeat offenders to continue that practice while giving genuine developers — incidentally, the overwhelming majority — a bad name.

The legislation should be amended to include a clause that states that a house cannot legally

be conveyed until the road and all relevant utilities are in place. I welcome the recommendation to adapt property certificates to include a legal opinion on the condition of the roads and sewers and the potential consequences of non-adoption.

I also support the recommendation that councils, in conjunction with NILGA, play a central role in co-ordinating a prioritisation audit of unadopted infrastructure. As a councillor until recently, I am of the view that no organisation is better informed or better placed to carry out such an audit in each respective district. That will be effective only if the necessary legislation, clarity and resources are in place to act on the audit's findings.

I appreciate that the subject of unadopted roads is very emotive and difficult to deal with, bearing in mind the number of agencies and factors involved. I believe that the report is long overdue. I welcome the fact that it is resolution-driven, avoids blame and places the homeowner at the centre of the resolution process.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately on the lunchtime suspension. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first business when the House returns will be Question Time. This debate will continue at 3.30 pm, when the next Member called to speak will be Mr Molloy.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.22 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Dallat] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture and Rural Development

Agriculture: EU Funding Applications

1. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline the steps that are being taken to regularise the dual claim use on applications under the single farm payment and the less-favoured area compensatory allowances schemes to meet EU requirements. (AQO 3016/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. My Department has been giving consideration to a range of approaches to address concerns that have been raised by EU Commission auditors on our controls governing dual use claims. The particular challenge is to develop a control mechanism that can demonstrate that the conditions of the single farm payment (SFP) and the less-favoured area compensatory allowance (LFACA) schemes are being met simultaneously by each claimant on a single parcel of land. At this stage, my preferred approach is that a written conacre agreement should form the basis of the control mechanism and should be in place between the single farm payment scheme and the LFACA scheme claimant where a dual use claim exists. My intention is that those enhanced controls would not place an unacceptable administrative burden on the Department or on applicants but will meet the Commission's concerns.

I launched a public consultation on that approach in early October, which closed on 9 November. At that time, 19 responses had been received. The majority of the responses supported my preferred approach, and most of the respondents were content with the proposal to use a standard written conacre agreement. I am currently considering all those responses and will announce my decision on the preferred way forward very soon.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the simplification around audit control. However, can the Minister give an undertaking that farmers will not be penalised because of any irregularities that

have existed in the system for single farm payments and payments for less-favoured areas?

Mrs O'Neill: I can give the Member that assurance. It is never the Department's intention to make life difficult for farmers. In a lot of these cases and in this instance, Europe dictates what it will accept from us, so it is important that we have proper controls in place. As I said, my preferred approach would be the most simple way forward, and I intend to work with the farmers to make sure that we can get those agreements out and they can easily access them, so that they can have something in place that will help us to move forward and avoid any negative comments from Europe.

Mr McAleer: Can the Minister assure us that the written conacre agreements will be as farmer-friendly and as simplified as possible so as not to add to the bureaucratic burdens that farmers currently experience?

Mrs O'Neill: I can assure the Member that I believe that the requirement to have the written agreement brought into place is the minimum necessary to allow us to separate the claimants for the single farm payment and LFACA schemes on a single land parcel to demonstrate that they meet the respective scheme obligations, individually and collectively. My officials have been working actively with the Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Ulster Farmers' Union to ensure that any such agreement is as farmer-friendly as possible but is also fit for purpose and acceptable to the Commission as a proper control mechanism.

Mr Kinahan: Will the Minister give us her assessment of the potential impact of the reclassification of less-favoured areas on future dual use claims?

Mrs O'Neill: The reclassifications are not relevant to this claim. That is a process that has been started in Europe. The Commission's thinking is that that will be separated from the CAP reform negotiations, so it is being put further down the line until perhaps 2014-15. There is a menu of options that may be applied in respect of all the changes that the Commission has proposed, but we want to make sure that we protect areas that are disadvantaged and that the proper support goes to those people. As the process develops further down the line, I will make sure that we consult widely with the people who will be impacted by those decisions. However, it seems that they have been put on the long finger, and it may not happen until 2014-15.

Farming: Regulation

2. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what steps are being taken to reduce the regulatory burden on the farming industry. (AQO 3017/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: Since taking over responsibility for agriculture and rural development, I have highlighted the reduction of the regulatory burden on the agrifood industry as a particular goal of mine to ensure that the amount of administrative work that farming businesses have to cope with is reduced as far as possible. The key aim has always been to ensure that the balance between regulation and simplification creates an environment that allows businesses to grow further and our rural communities to flourish.

My officials are currently taking forward the third year of the Department's current three-year better regulation action plan. The specific key actions in the third year involve my officials working on the development of plans to introduce an electronic identification policy for cattle. The legislation to underpin that is under consideration in Brussels at present and offers the potential to significantly reduce paperwork for farmers. Another key action is the development of remote sensing techniques, which have the potential to reduce the number of on-farm inspections carried out by the Department. Those, together with other initiatives such as a major new project to procure a replacement for the current animal and public health information system (APHIS), will provide further opportunities for us to help farmers to reduce their administrative burden by improving flexibility of access and performance.

You will also be aware that my officials are working with stakeholders on developing the next rural development programme, which will run up to 2020. That presents us all with a tremendous opportunity to contribute ideas for simplification in the new programme and measures at this very early stage in the programme's development.

The industry is well aware of the tight restraints under which we are obliged to regulate and appreciates that the rules safeguard the industry and protect the public. However, I am determined that simplification will be a key theme in the future.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for that response. I welcome the work that her Department is taking forward to ensure that the processes are as simplified as possible and

only where necessary. The Minister will know that the farming industry often feels aggrieved at the rigidity of the Environment Agency in respect of the role that it plays and how that impacts on the farming industry in terms of the closed period to do with slurry spreading and other areas where it often encounters an inflexible approach and an approach that is not common sense. Can she assure the House that she will continue to represent the concerns of farmers so that the Environment Agency acts reasonably?

Mrs O'Neill: I agree with the Member, particularly in wanting to avoid any situations where you create additional administrative burdens on the farming community. It is always about a balance between having legislative controls and providing freedom for the industry to operate and do what it is doing. I have engaged with DOE on that issue, and we will continue to do that. I have a meeting scheduled with the Environment Minister in the next number of weeks, and that is one of the issues that is on the agenda. So, it will continually be raised. As those issues are raised by farmers, I will make sure that I carry out my role and responsibility by raising them with DOE or any other Department that may come into play in any of these issues.

Mr Byrne: Can the Minister enlighten the House as to whether the LPIS will be on target to be delivered so that it can help farmers in their claims? Will the Minister accept that the random selection of farmers for scrutiny is causing great concern to some of them?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that I updated the House last week on the maps issue and LPIS, and I refer him to that statement. We are still on target according to what I said at that time. It is important that the Department continues to assist farmers to do things better, to make sure that we improve productivity and to make sure that everything is speeded up.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for her replies to that important question. Can the Minister give her Department's specific year-on-year accomplishments during the past three years on reducing the regulatory burden, which, as she knows, is a target for the Programme for Government?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member will be aware that work was taken forward with DARD and DETI looking at the industry in general and how we can improve things. A number of interim targets have been achieved, and there have

been ongoing improvements, but not all things have been achieved. The plan will run up to, I think, 2015 before we will expect to see full delivery, but there have been a lot of improvements, particularly over the last number of years around sheep ID. That reduces the burden on farmers to be able to freely move their sheep. We have improvements in APHIS, we have the synchronising of herd testing and we have the introduction of the computerisation of the agrienvironment scheme. There are four key pieces of work that are definitely working to reduce the burden on farmers, and there is much more work ongoing. I encourage farmers who have very simple ideas about how to improve things to contact us through the website or through DARD Direct offices to give us the practical examples, and we will make sure that we improve things where it is possible to improve them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Jim Allister for a supplementary.

Mr Allister: Mr Cree stole my thunder, I am afraid.

Common Agricultural Policy

3. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on negotiations on the common agricultural policy reform to maximise the interests of the farming community. (AQO 3018/11-15)

11. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on the common agricultural policy reform negotiations. (AQO 3026/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 3 and 11 together.

It is fair to say that progress in the CAP reform post 2013 negotiations has been very slow. One of the main stumbling blocks has been the desire to secure agreement in the negotiations on the EU budget for 2014-2020. The budget negotiations have been difficult, to say the least, given the wide-ranging views on the way forward coming from member states and the Parliament. Members will be aware that discussions between member states on 22 and 23 November broke up without any agreement. It is unlikely that any real progress will be made on CAP reform until after the budget negotiations conclude. I continue to argue strongly for no further cuts to the CAP budget beyond what the EU Commission has

proposed, which is a freeze in nominal terms. That would amount to a substantial reduction in real terms and is harsher treatment for the CAP compared with the EU budget as a whole, even if it were frozen in real terms as some are demanding.

Despite the complication of the EU budget negotiations, discussion on the detail of the proposals for CAP reform continues. I continue to do all that I can to influence that discussion and represent the interests of our farmers and rural communities. I suggested a number of amendments to the CAP reform proposals. I am grateful to our MEPs for putting those forward. Around 7,500 amendments were proposed by MEPs. They are being consolidated into a more manageable number prior to the Parliament completing its First Reading, which is now scheduled for March 2013. With regard to the EU Council discussions, the presidency has tabled revised texts that could be described as a step in the right direction on some issues. However, it is clear from the reaction of member states that many aspects remain unresolved.

I have now met the Commission on a number of occasions and taken the opportunity to push hard for change on key issues, such as moving to a flat rate and greening. Apart from the Commission, I have been engaging directly with DEFRA Ministers and my devolved Administration colleagues on the reform proposals, as well as with Minister Simon Coveney in the South. I also continue to have regular discussions on CAP reform with our local MEPs. My officials are very closely involved with DEFRA and devolved Administration counterparts in feeding into the Brussels working groups. They also keep in regular contact with our officials in Dublin.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, will you clarify that you are grouping questions 3 and 11?

Mrs O'Neill: Yes.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for her answer. Has she had any direct discussions, negotiations or dialogue with the Minister for Agriculture in Dublin, Simon Coveney, or the appropriate Ministers in Cardiff, Edinburgh or DEFRA in London? I am talking about ministerial rather than official level.

Mrs O'Neill: I think that I answered that question in my main answer. I have had ongoing discussions. Last Thursday, I had discussions with DEFRA, the Scottish Minister and the Welsh Minister. The previous week, I

met Simon Coveney to discuss CAP issues. I have ongoing discussions with all those people. It is important that we also continue to engage with our MEPs because we have co-decision-making in Europe now. That means that our MEPs play a key role in the discussions that go through the Parliament.

I continue to use every avenue that is open to me and knock on every door that I can to ensure that our views are reflected in the ongoing discussions. It is important that we continue to do that in the time ahead. It is unfortunate that we did not agree the financial framework last week because that holds up the negotiation of all the details. The next six months will be crucial.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Oliver McMullan. I am sorry, Mr McMullan. Your question 11 is grouped with question 3. Therefore, you are now entitled to ask a question.

Mr McMullan: Go ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Chris Hazzard.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Has the Minister any idea of when CAP reform will be agreed?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, it is not possible to be definitive at this stage. Given the failure to agree the financial framework, it will be difficult to gauge how we will move forward. The earliest that we may be able to see a financial agreement, if that is possible, will be February. That will make the timescale very tight for the South of Ireland to deliver in its presidency before the end of June. I know that they are anxious to do that. A lot of the detail could be worked through quickly if we were able to get the financial framework. However, in its absence, it is difficult to iron out all the other issues because you do not know what money you are dealing with.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson.

Mrs Dobson: My question has been answered.

2.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr William Irwin.

Mr Irwin: Moving to a flat-rate payment will disadvantage many farmers in Northern Ireland who produce a lot of food but own very little

land. Does the Minister agree that Northern Ireland needs a degree of flexibility to address that?

Mrs O'Neill: The three core components of the argument around CAP reform are an adequate budget, flexibility and simplification. That will be key as we move forward.

We carried out a lot of analysis on the flat rate, which showed that the flat rate will favour farms that, under the old regime, were lightly stocked and claimed relatively little direct support. The key issue for us is that, although the Commission has put an offer on the table of five years to allow for the transition, we have argued very strongly that we need a 10-year transition period to allow farmers to adapt to the changing situation. That is gathering a lot of support across Europe, and we hope to achieve some movement on it in the time ahead. What the Commission has proposed is much too severe. It is not gradual, and you cannot expect farmers to adapt to that kind of change overnight.

Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Framework

4. **Ms McCorley** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline progress on her tackling rural poverty and rural isolation strategy, which includes the rural challenge fund. (AQO 3019/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: I am very pleased with the progress achieved by the tackling rural poverty and social isolation framework, which is on course to meet its specific Programme for Government target, including spend of £4 million in this financial year.

A range of initiatives under the framework is currently under way, all of which provide valuable assistance in addressing rural poverty and isolation. They include the assisted rural travel scheme; support for the Rural Support charity; support for rural community development work; the maximising access in rural areas (MARA) project; the farm family health checks; the connecting elderly rural isolated project; the rural borewells scheme; a youth employability programme and a young entrepreneurs project; and fuel poverty energy efficiency work.

The rural challenge programme opened a call for applications in September. It included a mandatory requirement for potential applicants to attend a best practice workshop to assist with the identification and evidencing of their local poverty and isolation needs. All 13 workshops

in the North have been completed, with over 400 community and voluntary groups having attended. That is very encouraging in itself and is a ringing endorsement of the need for such interventions in rural communities and of the role played by volunteers who want to improve the community in which they live. The closing date for receipt of applications is 14 December, and I expect that we will achieve a high number of applications.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answer. What is the programme budget and the timeline for delivery?

Mrs O'Neill: As set out in the business case, the budget for the rural challenge programme is £700,000. It is envisaged that, through the programme, 70 projects will be funded. Ideally, that would mean funding 10 projects from each of the identified target beneficiary groupings. However, as the minimum grant is £2,000 and the maximum £10,000, it may be possible to fund more than 70 projects, as it is unlikely that all applicants will request the maximum grant.

The programme opened for applications on 14 September, and adverts were placed in the three main papers. Applicants have had three months to consider the needs of their area, identify the appropriate solution and submit an application. That, absolutely, is the beauty of the project. It is about an idea that has grown in a local area and suits the needs of that rural community. It is not about the Department telling an area to suit its priorities. To me, that is the success of the programme and why we have been so oversubscribed with applications.

The deadline for submission of applications is 14 December. I hope that applications will be assessed for their eligibility and scored in January and February, with letters of offer to successful applicants scheduled to be issued in March next year. They will then have 21 months from that date to deliver their project and a further three months to draw down any grant aid and submit a final project evaluation. I am quite excited by the project, and I hope that the applications are beneficial for rural communities.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her responses so far. Will the Minister give the House details of all the administration costs associated with the rural challenge fund to date?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have a figure. That programme is run by the rural development end of the Department, and a group of people are consistently working on it. There is no additional cost in that respect. I am happy to provide the Member with the detail of the breakdown of the admin costs, if I can get it.

The beauty of the programme and the entire tackling poverty and social isolation project is that £16 million will be invested in rural communities, and that £16 million will be used for all the various projects to lever in additional funding from the other Departments. So, I am not concerned about the administration costs in this regard, but I am happy to provide the Member with a breakdown.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that they must continue to rise in their place otherwise they will not be called.

Mr Rogers: I thank the Minister for her responses thus far. What discussions has her Department had with DRD to continue to prioritise community transport for rural dwellers?

Mrs O'Neill: I am happy to provide the Member with more detail, but I can say that we continue to work with DRD on rural transport. As you are aware, access to public transport in some rural areas is sparse, to say the least, so I will continue to fund that. I do not have the exact figure but am happy to provide that to the Member by letter after Question Time. Transport is a priority area for me in tackling the inaccessibility and the inequality that exists in access to public transport.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. What role does she see for a robust shared future strategy for increasing cohesion in rural communities?

Mrs O'Neill: We all welcome and look forward to the cohesion and integration strategy. All the work that is ongoing in the tackling poverty and social isolation framework looks at the needs of rural communities as a whole; it is not broken down into nationalist or unionist backgrounds. It is about how we look at and address the needs of rural communities. Those are the same for everybody. It is all about tackling inequality, isolation and poverty, regardless of anybody's background.

Ash Dieback Disease

5. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to outline what discussions she has had with local councils in relation to ash dieback disease. (AQO 3020/11-15)

7. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development what is the position regarding the spread of *chalara fraxinea* in ash trees. (AQO 3022/11-15)

8. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development whether the identified cause of ash dieback disease is the only source. (AQO 3023/11-15)

9. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development how many cases of ash dieback (*chalara fraxinea*) there are on Forest Service land. (AQO 3024/11-15)

12. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development for an update on ash dieback disease. (AQO 3027/11-15)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will answer questions 5, 7, 8, 9 and 12 together.

Our strategy for dealing with the disease requires the surveillance of likely sources of infection and the detection and eradication of diseased trees. Some councils have landfill facilities and have made them available for the deep burial of trees that need to be destroyed. One council has been directly involved because infected trees were found in a recent planting on its land. The council officers are working very closely with DARD inspectors to protect the site and destroy the trees. The chief executive of Forest Service is contacting council chief executives as and when infected trees are found in that council area to advise them of the finding, brief them on the actions that need to be taken and to offer basic biosecurity advice. Council biodiversity officers and recreation officers also play an important part in monitoring trees in council areas and alerting the Department when they are concerned about diseased trees.

In terms of the current spread of the disease, I can advise that the position at 10.00 am today was that there have been 16 confirmed outbreaks at recently planted sites and two in trade where material was found before distribution to sites. The confirmed outbreaks at recently planted sites are in Counties Antrim, Down, Derry and Tyrone. Notices are being

served, with the destruction of some 8,700 plants to date. Again, as of 10.00 am today, there were four separate sources, two of which were planted out, all linked to imports from continental Europe. I can confirm that, to date, no cases have been found on Forest Service land.

This disease has a very high priority in the work of my Department, and considerable resources are being allocated using our trade knowledge to trace the movements of plant material from suspected sources to planting sites. We are giving that the greatest priority. In addition, we have surveillance under way targeting about 1,000 sites and are focusing on sites planted over the past five years. Our strategy going forward to eradicate the disease will depend on the outcome of that surveillance and the developing scientific advice.

Information about the disease symptoms is available on the DARD website to assist landowners with their inspection and the recognition of the disease. A telephone helpline number for reporting suspect sites is also available on the website.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your time is up.

Mrs O'Neill: I take this opportunity to encourage all stakeholders to be vigilant and report all signs to the Department.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answer. Minister, the diamond jubilee wood in east Antrim was established last year with the planting out of some 60,000 trees. It was done in conjunction with a departmental forestry grant, and part of the condition of the grant was that 22,000 to 23,000 ash trees had to be planted. Knowing that the disease was present in Europe for a number of years, was it or is it good practice to insist on such a high percentage of single species tree in any project as a condition?

Mrs O'Neill: I cannot speak about the individual case, but I can confirm that this strain of the disease is very different from what we have seen in Europe, which is why there are particular problems in identifying effective treatment and actions. The science is not there because this is a relatively new disease, only found in England since 2011. We are working our way through that and trying to develop the science and the effective treatments as we move forward. At this stage, it is about taking out the new plants and making sure that we target the new plants so that it never gets into the older plants. The condition, as I said, is not

because there was inaction: this is a very different strain of ash disease.

Ms Lo: As the Minister said, England discovered this last year. Has the Minister engaged with the parts of England that were affected about best practice and what they have been doing to address the problem?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that it is my priority to make sure that we eradicate the disease. That is very much the stage that we are still at. We are very much involved in surveillance and research. We will look to everybody, particularly to England because of the position that they are in. We also look towards the South of Ireland. We have very much employed the fortress Ireland approach when it comes to keeping the disease out of Ireland. That is all important work. It is important that we engage, particularly as we develop the science. We do not want to reinvent the wheel: if someone else has found a way to deal with the disease, we will obviously also use that method. We are working with DEFRA and DAFF in the South.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. What steps is she taking to ensure that the four sources identified for the disease in Northern Ireland are the only sources?

Mrs O'Neill: I assure the Member that we are currently surveying. As I said, we want to survey about 1,000 sites in which we want to make sure that there are no symptoms present. At the moment, I think that we have been to over 200 sites. There is a trade trace, if you like, so we can trace anything that has been imported from potential sites or the sites where cases have been detected. We are very much tracing that whole movement. Officials are working through that process. We have diverted a lot of staff to make sure that they are out on the ground, doing the inspections and getting us as much information as possible. The priority at the moment has to be around surveillance, research and eradication. I am very much committed to making sure that we eradicate the disease.

The Department is also involved in practical support to assist people to remove trees that need to be removed very speedily. We do not want things sitting around if there is the potential for disease. A lot of work is going on.

I use this opportunity to appeal to people to be very vigilant and report symptoms. If you are in any doubt, please contact us and ask for

information. We will continue to work with our partners, particularly councils that have access to parks and Forest Service. It is important that people are very vigilant about their biosecurity.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I discourage the private conversations that are taking place on both sides of the House while the Minister is answering questions.

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister state whether her Department will replace trees that are lost to ash dieback with indigenous species to maintain Northern Ireland's natural woodland habitats as much as possible?

Mrs O'Neill: I missed the start of the Member's contribution, but I think that he asked me whether I was planning to replace trees. As I said, the focus at the moment is certainly on eradication. I have asked Forest Service to look at the potential implications further down the line, such as, for example, for someone who received their woodland grant scheme and then had to remove trees. We are working on that, but the focus at the moment is very much on making sure that we eradicate the disease. We do not want it to be an even bigger problem down the line. We want to avoid any instances in which people have to come to us for compensation. I assure the Member that we are still on target to pay our woodland premium scheme in December and for the forestry agrienvironment scheme. There is no delay in any of that because of what is going on.

Culture, Arts and Leisure

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

World Police and Fire Games

1. **Mrs McKeivitt** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she is taking to ensure a lasting legacy from the 2013 World Police and Fire Games. (AQO 3029/11-15)

3. **Mr D McIlveen** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her Department's plans to ensure that there is a lasting legacy following the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3031/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): I thank the Member for her question. With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will take questions 1 and 3 together.

The World Police and Fire Games in 2013 must deliver a lasting legacy. The games provide an opportunity to build strong links between the services and the communities that they serve. The volunteer programme's main recruitment phase closed with over 6,000 people pledging support. The focus has now moved to encouraging under-represented groups, including people with disabilities, older people and people from neighbourhood renewal areas to volunteer during the games, and hopefully beyond.

2.30 pm

Mrs McKeivitt: The possibility has been raised that accommodation might cause some difficulty in the delivery of the games. I welcome the information roadshows on that, which are beginning this week. Does the Minister think that any lessons could be taken from the efforts to create a lasting legacy from the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and applied to the World Police and Fire Games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. There are lots of lessons we can learn, particularly from the more positive aspects. Young ambassadors were involved in the Olympics and Paralympics, as well as the games makers or volunteers from both games. We hope to transfer that to the World Police and Fire Games. We will look at the role of charities and under-represented communities, as well as at accommodation, which is going to be a big challenge. What ideas did the city of London employ that we can perhaps learn from? I am confident that the company is currently looking at all those things, not just on its own but with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL), Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, (DETI) and the Tourist Board, to see how it can make sure we meet that challenge in the best way possible. There are lots of positive things we can do that will leave a lasting legacy from 2013.

Mr D McIlveen: Minister, will you tell me whether you plan to give any support to businesses that have been successful in securing bids? I am thinking of the example of Carnview Farms in Ballymena, which is hosting the shooting event. It is going to have to invest a significant amount of money in facilities just to bring the venue up to standard for the games. Will your Department be offering any financial support to them?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of the overall funding package, Sport NI is looking at what additional

support it can give. I assume, although I have not yet received a report, that it will be looking at venues, particularly those outside Belfast. Belfast City Council is looking at venues in Belfast in conjunction with DCAL. I will ask Sport NI, particularly after your question, what it is doing to help areas outside Belfast to achieve the best standard possible. I do know that, as part of the selection criteria to become a host venue outside Belfast, a lot of scrutiny, reviewing and monitoring went on. All venues met the required standard or above, so I am confident that, whatever support is needed, it is not going to be a huge amount of money. I will certainly look at that to see how we can deliver a better product overall.

Mr Cree: Will the Minister outline the main challenges in staging a successful World Police and Fire Games? Has she had discussions with her Executive colleagues about the question of accommodation for spectators and visitors?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Myself and Minister Foster, through our officials and Departments, are working on accommodation and the tourism product. I think that we need to look at the overall position of where we are with enhancing the opportunities for the World Police and Fire Games. Certainly, incidents such as what happened in Belfast last night absolutely do not add to the logo of "the friendliest games ever", particularly when 15 police officers were injured as a result of the trouble. Collectively, we have been looking at areas like accommodation, businesses and communities. We have been working with Belfast City Council to try to make sure that we give as much support as possible.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister look forward to welcoming a royal personality to the opening of the games? Has such an invitation been issued?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not received any such invitation.

Stadia Development

2. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the developmental stages of the three stadia. (AQO 3030/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. There has been considerable activity, particularly over the past six months, in relation to the development stages of the three stadia. Under close guidance of DCAL officials, the

governing bodies of all three sports have been able to establish the necessary frameworks and processes and arrangements and delivery mechanisms that are essential to making timely and significant progress on each of the stadia projects. Social clauses have been put in place for the rugby construction contract, and are being developed for GAA and IFA construction contracts, to ensure that opportunities exist for the long-term unemployed, apprenticeships and student placements.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her answer, in which she partially addressed my follow-up. I am concerned that long-term unemployed and young people in particular are given opportunities during the construction phase of the three stadia. Will she indicate whether that is part of the specification for the contracts and procurement?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can give that comfort to the Member. For a long time, we have been hearing about the long-term unemployed, and there have been different definitions of it. But I assure the Member that I am talking about "long term" meaning 12 months and beyond for the purpose of the social clauses that are included in the procurement tender and the contract documentation. For example, in the Ravenhill contract, we are looking at employing seven long-term unemployed; creating four new apprenticeships; having 5% of the workforce in recognised apprenticeships schemes; having two student placements; and producing five practical post-contract proposals that will develop a range of social returns for that area.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. She may be aware that representatives of the three sports gave evidence to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee last week. In relation to Windsor Park — home of the green and white army — is the council and her Department working together closely on a collaborative approach to the Olympia leisure centre and the new Windsor Park, to provide value for money for both ratepayers and taxpayers?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am due to meet Belfast City Council and my officials in January to talk about other issues, including what those new proposals look like and how far they are developed. The Member is 100% right: we need to make sure that we get value for money, particularly for ratepayers and taxpayers. I remember answering that question from your colleague, I think that it was Jimmy Spratt, by saying that it does not make sense for one Department to develop opportunities only for

another Department — or in this case local government — to come along afterwards and miss out on opportunities when we can deliver a better product, which I believe that the people of south Belfast deserve.

Mr McDevitt: Councillor Humphrey may want to declare an interest the next time that he asks a question about Belfast City Council. However, is the Minister satisfied that the development at Ravenhill rugby ground will definitely be completed by the summer of 2014?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am absolutely determined that it will be delivered by 2014. In the past six months, I have been persistent and consistent with each of the three sporting bodies, and we have worked very closely to ensure that those targets are met. We met as recently as last week and will meet again next week, before Christmas comes and we go into a new year. Work has already started, as planned, at Ravenhill. So, everything is on schedule, and I am delighted that that is the case.

Mr McGimpsey: Will the Department support the IFA's ambition to have a museum for football in the Windsor Park complex, bearing in mind the huge legacy that we have in this country? With the world's fourth oldest association and third oldest football league, we have a legacy and a story to tell. Therefore, it is important that the Department indicates its support, at this stage, for such a development.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I have to be honest: the first time that I heard about this was on the radio the other morning, and I just caught the tail end of what Jim Gracey said. I think that sport is needed but missing from within our museum family. We have a huge narrative and proud history in all sports, and that is not reflected by what is in our museums. The museum at Croke Park is a tourist attraction that brings people into the stadium and adds to the economy. It also gives a sense of history reflecting the sport which, I believe, is missing here at the minute. So, I am waiting to hear what those proposals are. I would welcome sport being better recognised by museums. It is down to the IFA and whatever it decides to propose. As long as the stands are built and the Department's requirements are met, anything additional is entirely down to the IFA. I will support its decision.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been dealt with and question 4 has been withdrawn.

Ulster-Scots Agency

5. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how her Department has measured the value for money delivered by the Ulster-Scots Agency between 2008-09 and 2010-11. (AQO 3033/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. A number of corporate governance arrangements are in place by which the sponsor Departments ensure that value for money is delivered by the agency. Those include progress reports from the chair and the CEO to Ministers at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) language body meetings; progress reports by the CEO at quarterly accountability meetings; NSMC language body meetings attended by officials from the sponsor Departments; attendance at the agency's audit and risk committee as observers; multi-report arrangements to both sponsor Departments on issues such as internal audit and fraud returns; and progress towards completing outstanding accounts and audit recommendations. The agency also prepares business cases for all proposed expenditure, and when those are above the CEO's delegated limit, they must be submitted to the sponsor Departments for consideration and approval. When projects are completed, post-project evaluations are undertaken, and samples of those are examined by my officials.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her answer. When can we expect full publication of the agency's accounts? Will they include a full assessment of the value-for-money aspect of its funding arrangements under the heading that she has just given us?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I had been anticipating that the accounts would be laid before the Assembly by December 2013, and it is with disappointment that I learn that it is not going to happen this year [*Interruption.*] sorry, 2012. They will not be laid now until 2013. Minister Deenihan and I received a report from the chairs of both agencies and their chief executives to say that that would happen, but unfortunately it is not going to happen. We have an NSMC language body meeting next week, and the issue will be raised again. The Member has asked that question previously and will persist until he gets the answer that he wants. I will ensure that that happens.

Mr Anderson: How does the Minister's Department measure value for money for Foras na Gaeilge?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The question is not appropriate to Ulster Scots. We will, therefore, move on. I call Mr Oliver McMullan. The question has to be on Ulster Scots.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us the current position with the 2009-2010 annual accounts?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member has probably just heard the response to Mr Lunn's question. The same question keeps coming up time and time again. Without fear of repeating myself, I will just say that I am disappointed that the assurances that Jimmy Deenihan, Dinny McGinley and I sought on the issue have not been realised. The latest update states that the 2009 accounts were signed off by the chairs and the chief executives on 7 November. The process is that the accounts were then certified by the C&AG on 26 November. The aim was to have those accounts laid before the Assembly in December 2012, as I stated to Mr Lunn, but they will not be laid and will be brought early in the new year. We will write again to the joint chairs of the language bodies requesting confirmation of when the 2010 accounts will be ready. As I said to Mr Lunn, I have no doubt that we will raise the issue at our next sectoral meeting, which is next Wednesday.

Mr Nesbitt: What is the Minister's assessment of the agency's strategy in promoting Ulster-Scots culture?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was privileged to be at the launch of the flagship schools programme. That is a fresh, new initiative that not only works with groups of adults in the community but looks at how Ulster-Scots culture and heritage could be added to the school curriculum. The flagship schools programme is one example of how the Ulster-Scots community is trying its best to promote what it has to offer, outside what it normally does, and what it hopes to achieve.

2.45 pm

World Police and Fire Games

6. **Mr Girvan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on the World Police and Fire Games 2013. (AQO 3034/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I am sure that he was here when I answered questions 1 and 3. By way of an update and to reassure him, I recently met

members of the board, and I believe that significant progress has been made in preparation for the World Police and Fire Games next year.

I will give the Member some examples. The games opened for registration on 1 November and already over 1,000 athletes have signed up and paid their registration fee, so that is good news. The company has received almost 6,500 applications from people who wish to volunteer during the games. That figure exceeds the target of over 4,000, and the Member will agree that that is very good news.

Already, almost 5,000 bed spaces have been booked through the Belfast Visitor and Convention Bureau. For us, that represents a value of over £1.7 million to the economy, which again is good news. The venues for the 57 sports across the North have also been announced. I believe that the milestones that we were hoping to achieve when I last met the board have been reached. That is very good progress to report.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Has any contact been made with the University of Ulster about accommodation in the halls of residence, which I understand will be vacant at that time?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I said in a previous answer, work is ongoing with officials from DETI, my Department and the Tourist Board, not just with the university but with other bodies. We have heard about concepts such as pop-up hotels and using halls of residence for accommodation.

We are now, unfortunately, in a situation in which there is lots of empty office space and apartment blocks, but we are actively pursuing those options. Accommodation will be a big challenge, given the numbers that I outlined. If that continues to progress, it is not a bad thing. It is a good thing in one way, but obviously it presents us with a different challenge.

All those novel ideas are currently being pursued. If the Member or anyone else has other ideas about how we might add to those, the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and I look forward to hearing them.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as na freagraí a thug sí dúinn inniu. I thank the Minister for her answers. She has told us that 1,000 athletes have already registered for the World Police and Fire Games.

Is she confident that the required figure of some 12,000 to 15,000 will be registered in time for the start of the games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I hope that that will be the case. The benchmarks that we have set thus far have been achieved, so that will be a sign of confidence, but I appreciate that it is early days.

We are in a good situation compared with the games that took place in New York last year. We have a smaller place here, but we have a lot more to offer. We also have a cultural package that will be wrapped around the games and will make them a far more attractive option. So far, we are on target, but we need to review things early next year. I hope to have further meetings with the World Police and Fire Games company to receive that assurance.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Will she ensure that her Department works closely with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to market us worldwide and maximise the potential of the 2013 games?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can give the Member that assurance. We have a big year to look ahead to next year, and the World Police and Fire Games are a part of that. A range of promotional materials is being used to attract additional tourists here, but, as well as that, we will have the City of Culture in Derry and the World Police and Fire Games in Belfast. We are looking at events to include Féile an Phobail in west Belfast, "The Gathering", Ceol na hÉireann and all the other options that are already there. It is about how we join those up and give people a bit more choice and, certainly, better value for money.

Sports Clubs: East Belfast

7. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure which sports clubs in the East Belfast constituency have applied for funding from her Department in the past 12 months. (AQO 3035/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Sport NI is responsible for the distribution of Exchequer funding to sport in the North, and it has advised me that no clubs in the East Belfast constituency have applied for funding in the past 12 months. Prior to that, between 2009 and 2011, Sport NI provided over £1.8 million of Exchequer and lottery funding to support sport and development in the East Belfast area. Furthermore, between 2009 and 2013, Sport NI has awarded Belfast City Council and Castlereagh Borough Council

almost £3 million of lottery funding through the Active Communities programme to encourage greater participation in sport in areas including East Belfast.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. I have to say that that answer will come as a great shock; that, indeed, in the past 12 months not one single penny of DCAL money has gone into the East Belfast constituency. It is a very large constituency with a large number of sports clubs actively pursuing their sports in the area. One can only question why that sudden drop-off has taken place over the past 12 months. What does the Minister intend to do to reactivate the level of funding?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think you have got a question there.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Maybe the Member did not hear the beginning of the answer, so I will repeat it. No clubs in the East Belfast constituency have applied for funding in the past 12 months. I want it on record that I resent the implication that, in the past 12 months, because I am in the Department, there has been some sort of dip in sports provision in East Belfast. I would like the Member to clarify that position. I am happy to meet him and groups from East Belfast to hear about their sporting needs, but I will not tolerate people making inferences that groups did not receive funding. Groups did not apply for funding.

Mr Copeland: Has the Minister taken any steps to meet officials from Glentoran Football Club in order to assess what assistance the Department may be able to offer due to the financial hardship they are facing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any request to meet Glentoran Football Club. I am not initiating any meetings with Glentoran Football Club, because I firmly believe, in the first instance, that it is a matter for Glentoran and the IFA. However, I understand the position that the players are in, particularly in the mouth of Christmas. I assure the Member that I have not received any requests for meetings.

Arts and Culture: Child Protection

8. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what steps she is taking to extend the work of the child protection in sport unit to the arts and culture sectors. (AQO 3036/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The child protection in sport unit was established in 2011 between Sport NI and the NSPCC. It is recognised and accepted as the source of expert safeguarding advice and support by the sports sector.

Consistent and comprehensive standards have been established and agreed for safeguarding children in sport. The attainment of these standards is a funding requirement for all recognised sports governing bodies and affiliated clubs. A network of trained designated safeguarding children's officers has been established within governing bodies such as the IFA, rugby and the GAA. These officers help to ensure that core child protection requirements are applied consistently across sports and that safeguarding procedures are embedded and implemented into sport at grass-roots levels.

Miss M McIlveen: Given the high priority of child protection and the status it is being given currently, would the Minister agree that it would be useful to collate information centrally on safeguarding issues and child protection referrals relating to DCAL's areas of responsibility?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I would agree. At the end of the day, the onus is not just on sport, it is on the whole DCAL family. I am keen to hear suggestions about anything that we can do to enhance the protection of children and vulnerable adults. That is the priority. There is no grey area here. I am more than willing to hear what the Member, or anyone else, can advise on anything that we can do to enhance that.

Mr Hussey: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Does she accept that the Sandy Row Amateur Boxing Club performed the necessary requirements as regards Access Northern Ireland and that this has been verified by the NSPCC? Does she therefore agree that the moves by the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) to disaffiliate the club are not valid?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware that the IABA disaffiliated Sandy Row boxing club; that is not the case. I cannot confirm any reports about child protection vetting at the Sandy Row boxing club. I would not even see those anyway. Sandy Row boxing club will receive funding based on its affiliation. Within that, there is a requirement around governance, and child protection is essential. Any reluctance to have that done would raise a lot of questions.

Creative Industries: NEETs

9. **Mr Rogers** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure how the creative industries sector, in particular television and film production, can help in reducing the number of young people not in education, employment or training. (AQO 3037/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The creative industries include areas such as music, designer fashion, craft, and television and film production. This vibrant sector harnesses our renowned creative and cultural strengths and enables individuals and companies to compete and succeed on the world stage, but we must ensure that our efforts to support the creative industries include providing opportunities for all. Young people not in education, employment or training are not bereft of creativity, talent or potential. The creative and cultural infrastructure programmes and organisations funded and supported by my Department provide opportunities to stimulate and nurture creative talent, self-belief and, hopefully, aspiration.

Mr Rogers: Thanks, Minister, for your response. Have you had discussions with the Department for Employment and Learning about how the creative industries fit into the success strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not had any discussions with the Minister for Employment and Learning, but I understand officials are working together. When I spoke recently to some groups from creative industries, particularly those involved in television and film production and fashion and design, one of the things that they raised constantly was the need to perhaps amend the further and higher education curriculum to meet the needs of the sector. That is a decision that the Minister for Employment and Learning needs to take. I am happy to try to bring that forward, because we need to try to make it easy for children and young people who are not in training, education or employment to access this rather than to keep the impediments that are there.

Lough Neagh Working Group

10. **Mr Molloy** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what input her Department has had to the Lough Neagh working group. (AQO 3038/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I nominated a senior official at grade

5 level to represent my Department as a member of the Lough Neagh working group. There have been four meetings of the working group, all of which have been attended by a DCAL official. My officials have supplied information and briefings about DCAL's involvement in Lough Neagh, as required by the working group.

My officials were in direct contact with 14 organisations, with whom my Department has dealings, to take note of their opinions about the ownership of Lough Neagh. Their views and written comments have been collated with information gathered by other Departments and will be taken into account for the report that is due to be given to the Executive.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her reply. This is a very important issue that we have been raising here for some time. What input can the public have to the working group? When are we likely to get the working group's final report?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member knows, this is being taken forward by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development. However, if there are any concerns about delays in the report going forward, I can assure the Member that my officials will do everything that they can to ensure that written requests for information are forwarded to the working group. There will be no delay from my Department.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister outline what impact the ongoing work of the Lough Neagh working group will have on the eel fishery?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Unfortunately, time is running out. I am happy to write to the Member with a bit more detail. It is key that local people who fish and are guardians of those rivers and lakes, and this lough in particular, have expert information and know exactly what is needed. I am open to listening to them. My officials will listen to their plans for the way forward in eel fishing. Local people need to ensure that the lough provides them with a living.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members will take their ease for a minute or two.

3.00 pm

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Deputy Speaker: Patsy McGlone is not in his place to ask question 1.

Parliament Buildings: Irish-medium Schools

2. **Mr McAleer** asked the Assembly Commission how many Irish-medium schools have visited Parliament Buildings in the current mandate. (AQO 3044/11-15)

Mr McElduff: I thank my colleague the Member for West Tyrone for asking how many Irish-medium schools have visited Parliament Buildings in the current mandate. Since May 2011, the Assembly Education Service has delivered the education programme to 10 groups of students from five Irish-medium schools, including Coláiste Feirste just yesterday.

The five schools that have visited are: Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagáin from north Belfast, which took part in an education programme in June; Coláiste Cois Life from Dublin, which took part in an education programme on 8 May; Coláiste Feirste from west Belfast took part in six education programmes, including one yesterday, as I said; Gaelcholáiste na Mara from Wicklow, which took part in an education programme in April; and Gaelscoil na Speiríní, which took part in an education programme in March.

Mr McAleer: I thank my colleague from West Tyrone for that comprehensive answer. Have the education officers received training in the Irish language?

Mr McElduff: Again, I thank Mr McAleer for his question. Go raibh maith agat as an cheist a chuir tú. One of the education officers in the team is studying for a qualification in the Irish language. Students from Irish-medium schools can receive a programme that is delivered mainly in Irish. Students from Irish-medium schools also get the opportunity to have a question-and-answer session with MLAs who are Irish speakers. The education team does its utmost to seek out the Gaelic speakers among the complement of MLAs.

Mr Gardiner: How are schools advised by the Education Service about its programmes?

Mr McElduff: The Assembly Education Service provides programmes and resources to support

young people in developing their understanding of the Assembly and to encourage their participation in the democratic process. All schools receive a letter and information about current programmes at the start of the academic year and are encouraged to take part, and our in-house and outreach programmes are well advertised on our website.

Mr I McCrea: Having heard Members opposite talk about how unwelcoming this place is to people from the Irish tradition, does the member of the Commission not welcome the fact that people from the Irish-medium sector feel comfortable coming to this Building?

Mr McElduff: I thank Mr McCrea for his question. Yes, obviously this is work in progress, and Irish-medium schools that visit Parliament Buildings at Stormont provide very positive feedback. That is down, not least, to the excellent service delivered by our Education Service, which I commend.

Youth Assembly

3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Youth Assembly. (AQO 3045/11-15)

Mr Weir: I thank Mr Lyttle for his question. Initial proposals for the development of a youth assembly were presented to stakeholders in October 2009. Following consultation with stakeholders, a youth-led approach to developing proposals for a youth assembly was strongly advocated and endorsed by the Assembly Commission. As a result, a youth panel was recruited to develop the proposals for a youth assembly. The youth panel, which comprised 30 young people aged between 16 and 18, developed the proposals between March 2010 and February 2011, and subsequently presented draft proposals to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister's junior Ministers and the Minister of Education in March 2011. The proposals were then presented to the Assembly Commission, which approved, in principle, the establishment of a youth assembly. A public consultation took place from May to September 2011. The consultation responses overwhelmingly supported the youth panel's proposal to establish a youth assembly.

In the intervening period since September 2011, the consultation responses have been considered, the youth panel has been given direction on some emerging issues and the resultant report has been drafted. Furthermore,

a significant amount of work has been done in developing the recruitment plans for the youth assembly as part of the inclusion and cost considerations. As a result of those deliberations, a proposal is being drafted for the Assembly Commission with a recommendation for a two-year pilot youth assembly. However, it must be noted that the imperative to establish a robust and fitting youth assembly must be measured against the resources available to deliver such an enterprise, and it is expected that that will be central to the Commission's decision for the future of the youth assembly.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his response. How important does he think the youth assembly will be in engaging with disaffected young people at this time, not least given the complete lack of leadership that is shown by many people in here on a number of issues?

Mr Weir: The Member is being very critical of himself and fellow MLAs. I do not share that opinion.

Youth engagement is an important element, and whether it is with disaffected youth or, indeed, young people in general, a positive role can be developed. Developing those positive, respectful relationships can promote good relations between young people, can help us to listen to the views of young people in their area and can deal with a range of campaign issues in relation to young people. No one would question the general principle of a youth assembly, but we are trying to judge the practicalities so that we get something that is fit for purpose in difficult financial circumstances. For example, the UK Youth Parliament costs around £1 million a year, and the Scottish Youth Parliament costs £700,000 a year. We have to balance those considerations as well.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the commissioner agree that the delay in getting this in place is regrettable? You said that the Scottish Parliament has something similar, and if it can do it, why can we not? When is it likely to be in place?

Mr Weir: It is about trying to ensure that we have adequate resources to cover it. I mentioned the cost of the assemblies, but I forgot to mention that the Welsh Assembly has a similar body. The Welsh are in no way patronising young people by calling it Funky Dragon, and that costs in excess of £500,000. It is important that we do not have something that is simply a paper exercise but is robust and fit for purpose. We must try to balance that

against the issue of adequate resources. All of us would like things to have happened quicker, but we have to ensure that we get it right.

Mrs McKeivitt: Are there youth parliaments in any other jurisdictions that we can look at to see best practice?

Mr Weir: There are youth parliaments in the Dáil, Westminster, Scotland and Wales. I am not suggesting that there are important youth parliaments in the Caribbean and that we could send a few Members on a fact-finding mission. A range of things can be looked at —

Mr Kennedy: Who is in Cuba?

Mr Weir: We wonder whether the two Members in Cuba have a one-way ticket or whether they will come back.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. We are getting well off the question.

Mr Weir: There are a number of youth parliaments. One of the things that we want to learn, and I have mentioned it in relation to that, is that there has been a considerable cost attached to that. So it is not just a question of learning what others are doing but of learning how we can do things more cost-efficiently. It must also be robust to make it meaningful. There are a number of examples that we can draw from.

Parliament Buildings: Security

4. **Mr Hamilton** asked the Assembly Commission what security measures will be put in place for people accessing Parliament Buildings via the newly constructed ramps at the front of the Building. (AQO 3046/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the question. The ramps that were installed over the summer are most welcome to disabled groups across Northern Ireland, and the Assembly Commission is determined to ensure that the Building has disabled-friendly aspects attached to everything that we do. The issue of security at the new front ramp was given careful consideration at the outset, and it was subsequently concluded that no additional security measures would be required for all users of that entrance. The search procedures at the front of the Building for such people using it will remain the same as the procedures that are currently used at the east and west entrances.

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member for his reply. I agree with his comments about making the Building as accessible as possible to all. Given that the new ramps are for people with mobility issues, how do people accessing the Building using those ramps and who go through the front door go through the appropriate security measures? If, as often happens, they and those accompanying them are permitted to bypass the security hut and bring their vehicles to the top car park, how do they go through security?

Mr P Ramsey: At present, disabled people who access the Building, either from the east or the west, are searched by a handheld scanner. A similar process will be in place on the new ramp entrance. The Commission is determined to ensure that the Building is totally accessible to everyone in our community, including people who are marginalised and who represent disabled groups. In introducing this exercise, we consulted with a range of disabled groups, including Disability Action, which approved the concept behind it. There will be no difference between the existing search procedures, which have been in place for a number of years, and the procedures with the new ramps at the front entrance.

Assembly: Irish Language

5. **Ms McGahan** asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has to reflect the culture and ethos of the Irish language. (AQO 3047/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the question. Draft language guidance has been under consideration by the Assembly Commission, and the views of all parties have been sought. Following discussions at the Assembly Commission meeting on 6 November this year, a number of issues were raised for further consideration, including offering Irish-medium schools the opportunity to have a tour of Parliament Buildings in the Irish language, as my colleague outlined. It was agreed that consideration of the language guidance continue in January next year. Members are asked to note that the Irish language is currently reflected in the Assembly's work, and I will go through some of the areas of that work. Remarks in Irish during plenary sittings are recorded in the Official Report. Correspondence that is received in Irish will be responded to in the same. In Committee meetings, a translation service is available on request. Callers who contact the Assembly indicating that they wish to conduct their business in Irish will be diverted to the Irish-

language voicemail, and following translation, referral to a relevant official for action will take place. Multilingual information leaflets, including in Irish, are available.

Ms McGahan: Go raibh maith agat. Can I have an update on the Assembly Commission language policy?

Mr P Ramsey: As I tried to outline in some way to the Member, the Assembly Commission's language policy is still under consideration. We will receive a further report in January next year, but we want to ensure that we progress with consensus.

Parliament Buildings: Flags

6. **Mr Allister** asked the Assembly Commission what progress has been made with adding Ulster Day to the occasions when the Union flag is flown from Parliament Buildings. (AQO 3048/11-15)

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the question. The arrangements for the flying of the Union flag from government buildings in Northern Ireland are set out by the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000, as amended by the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) 2002.

3.15 pm

The Assembly Commission's policy is to follow those regulations. Under those regulations, the list of designated days, of which the Member is aware, is issued by OFMDFM each year. Generally, they are 15 days in total. That is not decided by the Assembly Commission. Ulster Day, which was referred to in the Member's question, is not one of the designated days.

The issue that the Member raised will be considered at the Assembly Commission meeting next week.

Mr Allister: I ask the member of the Commission to confirm that the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000 does not by law apply to this Building and nor do the designated days. They apply rather by the choice of the Assembly Commission, which chooses to use them as a template. There is no compulsion on the Commission to do that by law. It is the Commission's choice, so it could change that policy. The Commission has, by its voting measures, a unionist majority when it comes to voting. Is the Commission member telling us that not a single member, including those who

went through a process of faux anger about the absence of the flag on Ulster Day, has raised the issue in the Commission?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think that we have a question.

Mr P Ramsey: I think that we have one or two. I can confirm for the Member that the Assembly Commission, at the onset of devolved government in Northern Ireland, decided to adopt the principle as outlined for other public buildings, and we should not be any different. I confirm to him, in picking up his second point, that in my time on the Assembly Commission, I have never received any request to fly the flag on any other day.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I ask Mr Ramsey whether, given the disgraceful scenes outside Belfast City Hall yesterday evening, the Commission has given —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order, please. That is not a relevant question.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Absolutely. Just let me finish. Has the Commission considered establishing either a subcommittee or an Ad Hoc Committee to discuss the whole flags issue, and perhaps give a lead to the rest of the region?

Mr P Ramsey: I agree with the Member. The flags issue is a very emotive and sensitive one. It is one that the Assembly Commission is always mindful of. In those circumstances, the Commission will reflect on and note Members' concerns. We always try to achieve the greatest consensus that we can on any issue, irrespective of how important it is to other Members or whether they view it as a priority.

The members of the Commission are mandated by political parties to represent them, and I am sure that our discussions next week, specifically on a formal request from a Member, may lead to some deliberation and discussion. At present, I believe that leadership is being taken by the Assembly Commission by having 15 designated days. That is consistent with policies for other public buildings across Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Assembly Commission. Members may now take their ease for a moment.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Committee Business

Unadopted Roads: Committee for Regional Development Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into unadopted roads in Northern Ireland (NIA 44/11/15); and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

Mr Molloy: I welcome the Regional Development Committee report, which highlights the problems of unfinished estates, unadopted roads, sewers, street lights, and so on.

In the previous debate that we held on this subject, I highlighted the plight of an estate in Coalisland, Gortview, which had similar problems. There was never a sewer connected, yet half a dozen houses had been sold. It is hard to believe how a house could be sold and how solicitors and others could sign up a house for sale, including getting a mortgage, without having a sewer connected, but that is the reality. Thankfully, that estate has now been resold to a new developer; it has been progressed and is now connected to a main sewer, and some of the other problems are being dealt with. It is important that we record similar situations right across the country where those types of actions have happened.

Members have mentioned the legal responsibility of solicitors when they sign up a person who is buying a house and the protection that the buyer expects to have in that situation. Hopefully, the Law Society and others will ensure that solicitors make sure that that happens when those arrangements are made.

I am concerned about the banks. The banks help a developer by providing the finances for the development and then the same bank provides the mortgages for those who want to buy those houses. The same bank was involved in the Gortview situation. It seemed that there was some easy way of transferring when all the legal requirements were not in place. It is important to ensure that the legal requirements are strengthened.

All the issues around unadopted roads did not happen just as a result of the economic

downturn. We have to look back a few years. Is the Minister aware that his predecessor, Conor Murphy, set up an inquiry to find out how many unadopted roads and lanes there were across the country? Has there been any response to that report? Perhaps the Minister could give us that information at a later stage.

I have in front of me a report that deals with the Culbane Road in the Magherafelt area. That road is two-thirds adopted; the other third has not been adopted. The local people have been asked to bring the end of that laneway up to almost motorway standard, even though the rest of the road is not up to that standard. The Department's reply was very clear. It noted that, in many rural locations, it would not make a lot of sense to make up those new parts to a full standard in narrow lanes or existing roads where adaptation has happened. That is the reality. Therefore, to get a roadway or a lane adopted in a rural area, why should the local people be asked to bring it up to a standard way beyond the standard of the adopted road that they are driving on? That all adds to the confusion. I am sure that the Minister will come back to that issue in the future.

I welcome the fact that we are dealing with new estates and new roads that have not been finished or adopted. However, it is important to look back and deal with the matter equally across the board, because many lane-ways in rural areas have never been adopted. There are also some estates in towns where the roads have not been adopted. Sandy Row — of all names — in Coalisland has never been adopted or even tarmacked by Roads Service and it is about 100 yds from the town centre. That is an example of where Roads Service did not complete all the tasks when it adopted those roads.

There is a similar situation in an estate in Killowen in Coalisland that was built in the 1960s. The council took a bond but never finished the road at the time. It has never been tarmacked or adopted, and the people who live there still have a road that has large puddles and potholes, and it has devalued their houses. Therefore, although we are dealing with the report on the inquiry —

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

Mr Molloy: — I ask the Minister to look back at previous experiences, and there are many of them.

Mrs D Kelly: When it gets to this stage, there is not an awful lot new that one can say. I welcome the Minister's presence for the debate and note his long service in the past as a local councillor. He will be very well aware of the difficulties faced by constituents in this matter. I am sure that the Minister is not happy to have inherited such a legacy from his predecessor, given that a number of recommendations within the report are amendments that can be brought forward by his Department to try to simplify the process and to hold people to greater account.

Other Members, including Mr Dickson in particular, referenced the responsibilities on the Law Society and lawyers when doing their conveyancing work and giving advice to potential homebuyers. After all, Mr Speaker, the purchase of a new home is the largest investment that most of us will ever make. During the Committee's inquiry, we heard horrendous stories of people having to live in developments in which there are neither adopted sewerage infrastructures nor, indeed, adopted roads. I am sure many people will understand that the non-adoption of roads in some of the housing developments has a direct implication for the provision of local council services, such as street cleansing and the collection of bins. In some cases, lawyers have been a bit too vociferous in their advice to councils not to collect the bins or lift litter from the streets, so there is no uniformity of advice across the district councils.

On the day that is in it, this is a very welcome debate. It is something that can make a real difference to people's lives. It will have a relevance to the industry, and if the Department and the Minister take forward some of the recommendations, particularly those around the amendments that are within his gift, which, I am sure he will — I am ambitious for the Minister — it will also give some degree of certainty.

I thank the Committee staff and all those who contributed to the report and gave evidence to the inquiry, not least our local councillors and local councils. We found their advice to be very valuable, and they are to be commended. I endorse the report's recommendations.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): In accordance with established guidance, I will provide a full and substantive response to the Committee for Regional Development's report in due course, but it is important to respond to today's debate, which I very much welcome. I thank Members for their contribution. I am somewhat disappointed, however, at the premature issuing of a press release on behalf of the Committee for Regional

Development before I had an opportunity to address the Assembly on the matter.

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

Members have highlighted the issue of unadopted roads on private developments and the distress that it can cause people. The vast majority of private street sites determined for adoption go through without the need for additional intervention from my Department. For example, in the past five years, Roads Service has adopted some 416 kilometres of new roads in housing developments, and Northern Ireland Water has adopted sewerage schemes in 772 developments. That said, I recognise that there are an increasing number of problem sites. In some cases, that is a consequence of the economic downturn, but, in all cases, I think it is as a result of developers washing their hands of their responsibilities. I am absolutely determined to tackle those developers and that legacy.

Officials in Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water have identified some 1,200 sites across Northern Ireland on which there has been no or limited progress by the developer. That is simply not acceptable. Officials are progressing through the list to finally deliver for the public adopted roads. The progress involves a process with some complexity, which, I think, has been acknowledged. Over the past four years, for example, Roads Service has issued 340 article 11 enforcement notices, which require the developer to complete necessary works to bring the roads and sewers up to the appropriate standard.

Let me be clear: the primary responsibility for providing new roads and sewers in housing developments lies with the developer. Although I have no immediate plans to change the private streets legislation, it does not follow that I rule out changes in the future to broaden the legislation. Developers must have that clear warning in mind when meeting their obligations under existing legislation. I can say with some confidence that, in recent times, the Department has been proactive in pursuing problem cases, and I want that progress to continue.

3.30 pm

Turning to the report itself, the Committee made 10 key recommendations. In principle, I support the policy direction that the Committee has taken. Indeed, in a sense, I take it as an endorsement of my Department's approach. I would like to comment on the

recommendations, particularly those that fall within the remit of my Department. The report's first two recommendations relate to the level of bonds and procedures for calling bonds in. I fully agree that the value of bonds must be set at appropriate levels to cover the completion of remedial works if required. Indeed, currently the bond calculation rates for new bonds are reviewed periodically to ensure that they reflect changing costs of road construction works. I remain committed to that approach.

I also support proposals for making procedures relating to the calling in of bonds as effective as possible. It is worth noting that, in addition to article 11 enforcement procedures, the current Private Streets Order provides for urgent repairs to the roads infrastructure, for example where there are immediate health or safety concerns. The most desirable solution is to facilitate the developer's completion of the roads and sewers to an adoptable standard at the earliest opportunity.

With regard to the report's third recommendation, namely that I review private streets legislation to ensure that it provides adequate measures to deal with increasing occurrences of unadopted roads, I can inform Members that Roads Service has reviewed the Private Streets Order in recent years. Therefore, I have no current plans for a further more comprehensive review of private streets legislation, but, as I have indicated, I am prepared to broaden its scope in respect of its impact.

The fact that the current private streets legislation has served its original purpose well is evidenced by the fact that, over the years, the majority of roads in new housing developments have been better and properly planned, approved and constructed. In due course, those roads have been adopted by Roads Service and have become part of the public road network.

There is no doubt that the economic pressures of recent years have increased the number of housing developments that have run into difficulties. As I said at the outset, we have some 1,200 sites pending. In dealing with such cases, the legislation and procedures for completing and adopting the affected roads have been tested.

In summary, while I do not plan any further comprehensive review of the Private Streets Order, I am willing to consider whether any procedures followed under the current legislation need to be further reviewed to enable my Department to deal effectively with

instances where the process for the adoption of new housing development roads runs into problems. As I have said, I will not rule out changes in the future to broaden mechanisms or to hold developers responsible for completing roads and sewers in a timely manner.

The Committee's report goes on to recommend a review of the Water and Sewerage Services Order. In principle, I support the policy direction taken by the Committee in that regard. I would summarise it as a desire to see all sewerage infrastructure adopted as far as is reasonable. Nobody — I underline that word — wants to see households left without adequate sewerage provision, and I sympathise with all those who have found themselves in that position. Nonetheless, as the Committee rightly notes, this is a complex area with potentially significant resource implications. Detailed analysis of unadopted sewerage infrastructure needs to take place before we can confidently recommend the best way forward. We also have to be mindful of the many demands on investment in the water and sewerage infrastructure. We are all aware of the impact of flooding on many households this year. Any analysis will have to examine existing policy and legislation, and identify how any necessary remedial work might be funded. When I have considered those issues thoroughly, I will be in a position to advise the Committee of my response, particularly with regard to the funding implications.

The report's fifth recommendation is that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) should co-ordinate a prioritisation audit in each council area. I would support such an exercise. If NILGA agrees to take that recommendation forward, Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water will work in partnership with it.

I also welcome and support the sixth and seventh recommendations, which are for improved information resources for home buyers and the inclusion of any legal opinion on property certificates that helps to clarify the position on the adoption status of roads and sewers for potential home buyers. Officials from Roads Service and NI Water have already engaged with the Law Society on those issues. I again pledge my Department's support for any initiatives to improve matters in those important areas.

The report's eighth recommendation deals with procedures to effect prompt enforcement action when appropriate. Although my Department has processes in place to trigger bond

enforcement and to guide through the various stages to completion, I am content to have those processes reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate for the current circumstances.

The last two recommendations relate to the establishment of a co-operation forum to agree how to deal with the issue of unadopted roads and sewers. It is proposed that that forum would be made up of representatives of residents, statutory and local government bodies, contractors, bond providers and the legal services. I am prepared to look at ways to take that work forward, and agree that the groups that are identified should be consulted and involved. However, I want to be clearer on the scope and direction of any work before committing my officials and resources to such a forum.

In conclusion, I welcome the Committee for Regional Development's report on its inquiry into unadopted roads. The scope of the recommendations recognises that many parties are involved. As I have stated previously, in order for private streets legislation to work as intended, it is essential that all parties that are involved play their part and discharge their responsibilities. That includes Roads Service, Northern Ireland Water, developers, planners, bond providers, solicitors and other stakeholders.

I will address quickly some of the issues that were raised in the debate. The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr Lynch, covered the background information to the report. I apologise that I was not in the Chamber for his initial comments. I got a sense firmly of his views on it and, indeed, on how things might be improved.

Mr McCrea, rightly, indicated his thanks and those of other Committee members to the Committee staff for having produced or helped to produce the report. Of course, he mentioned local government and his own particular areas of Cookstown and Magherafelt.

Mr Ross Hussey was very supportive of the report and also, helpfully, of the approach that was adopted by the Department and Northern Ireland Water as we seek to deal with these matters.

Mr Dallat, rightly, highlighted the issue of resources, which will be key going forward. Mr Dickson mentioned supporting the NILGA audit, and the importance of that. One hopes that that co-operation will be available as we move forward.

Mr Easton explained the background to some of the problems experienced by householders and homeowners, and I think that all of us, on a constituency level, are aware of those issues.

Mr McAleer suggested that there should be a legal clause stating that developers should not be allowed to move to or begin work on another site until they have completed any existing work. That may be problematic legally and, from a construction and a builder's point of view, pragmatically. So we need to look at that very closely.

Mr Molloy welcomed the report. He raised the issue of Gortview, which he covered in a previous representation in the House. I am pleased that some progress has been made on that. He also returned to the issue of unadopted country lanes and alleyways. That was not the subject or focus of the debate, but I will attempt to update him on it. Of course, he also mentioned that an area in Sandy Row outside Coalisland is in a deplorable state. Perhaps if they organised a parade, things might improve — or maybe not.

Finally, as I said, I will give a full and comprehensive response to the Committee's report in due course. I hope that Members recognise how seriously I take the issue and, indeed, my determination to address the situation through the range of measures that I announced today.

Mr Lynch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. First, I want to address the Minister's concern about the press release. The report was embargoed until the commencement of this plenary debate, and I covered what is in the report. I accept his apologies for not being in the Chamber at the beginning. As we learned last week, we cannot be in all places at all times.

I want to thank the Chair and members of the Committee for Regional Development for their valuable contributions during the inquiry and in the debate today. I also want to thank the Minister and Members for their contributions; those who provided written and oral evidence to the Committee; the Assembly Research and Information Service; Hansard; and, finally, the Committee admin team for its continual support and help.

I am pleased that the Minister expressed his support for the policy direction taken both here today and in correspondence to the Committee in response to the report. The Committee fully

understands the complexities of the subject matter and that the Minister and, indeed, his Executive colleagues may wish to reflect on the recommendations arising from the inquiry. I hope, however, that that reflection is not open-ended and that the Minister and his departmental officials will bring an action plan to the Committee early in the new year, detailing the pathway they wish to take, as well as the timings, to implement the report's recommendations. Certainly, we as a Committee, as a priority, want the legislation reviewed and improved information for residents.

I now want to respond to some of the comments offered by Members, some of which the Minister mentioned.

Mr McCrea updated the House on the day-to-day practicalities and problems faced by people living in unfinished developments, and he reiterated the need to trigger the bonds more quickly.

Mr Hussey accepted the fact that we need to move forward quickly on the matter. He stated that, in his experience, there appears to be a reluctance to draw on the bond. He reinforced the fact that the recommendations are pragmatic rather than complex and welcomed the development of a code of practice and a priority audit.

3.45 pm

Mr Dallat sympathised with the Minister on the potential cost of remedying the problem and offered him his support, in particular on bringing in new legislation. That is support that I and other members of Committee extend to the Minister.

Mr Dickson said that the report is an example of democracy at work. When a problem was brought to the Committee, it acted, and the result was sensible recommendations, in particular the creation of greater awareness among all stakeholders involved in the process. Mr Easton recognised that there is a fine balancing act to be struck between supporting residents and supporting developers under significant financial pressure. He particularly welcomed the proposed changes and the development of the property certificate.

My colleague Mr McAleer recognised the pragmatic and positive nature of the report, in that it does not seek to attribute blame but rather seeks resolution through consensus. He stated that local councils are ideally placed to undertake the prioritisation audit. My other

colleague Mr Molloy welcomed the report and questioned how a house in his constituency could be sold when the sewers were not correctly connected. He sought information on a report conducted by the Minister's predecessor. I am sure that if that is available, the Committee will be keen to follow up on it. Mrs Kelly said that the process needs to be simplified and people held to account. She also stated that there needs to be uniformity in the advice offered to residents.

We have heard a number of descriptions of the report: pragmatic; sensible; positive; balanced; and reflective. I thank Members for their kind words. The Committee does not set out to find blame but rather solutions. We did not set out to accuse but rather to advise. We did not set out to score points but rather to make points — points that are practicable, appropriate and protective and that can be acted on. On behalf of the Committee for Regional Development, I strongly commend the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into unadopted roads in Northern Ireland (NIA 44/11/15); and calls on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with his Executive colleagues and relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations.

Private Members' Business

Narrow Water Bridge

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

Mrs McKeivitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the significant social and economic benefits, particularly for tourism, that will flow from the proposed Narrow Water bridge project in south Down; notes that the project has obtained planning consent on both sides of the border; welcomes the support of the Irish Government for the project and the Special EU Programmes Body's decision to allocate very substantial funding for the bridge; calls on the Executive to make explicit their support for the project; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make clear his commitment to the successful delivery of the Narrow Water bridge project and to take the lead, along with his counterparts in the Irish Government, in ensuring that any remaining finance required to complete the funding package is committed immediately.

I am delighted to be given the privilege of proposing the motion on behalf of the SDLP, and I ask each Member to support it. The House often has to deal with complicated issues involving the conflict of valid viewpoints, the careful weighing up of cost and benefit, and the advantage and disadvantage to various constituencies, communities and interests. I am happy to be able to say that today we are not dealing with such an issue. This one is simple and it is clear for all to see where the good choice lies. Its rightness and merit is self-evident.

I am a passionate supporter of the Narrow Water bridge project and have been since I first heard about the proposal at a young age. It was a local Warrenpoint GP, Dr Donal O'Tierney, who first made the proposal in response to a consultation on the new Newry plan in 1971. The east border region committee, one of five cross-border networks comprising 10 local authorities, was founded in 1976, and item number one on the agenda of its inaugural meeting was the Narrow Water

bridge. At that time, the estimated cost of the bridge was £1 million.

In 1979, Newry and Mourne District Council and Louth County Council commissioned an engineering survey that showed that a bridge would be very feasible. The proposal has enjoyed wide support since then. The Narrow Water bridge action group was reformed in 1991. Many individuals from our communities in south Down and north Louth have lobbied continuously ever since. The only issue that I have with that little bit of research was discovering that the idea of the bridge and me appear to have been conceived around the same time.

I back the project because it is a genuinely symbolic cross-border project. It provides the first bridge that links Ireland North and South. It makes the very best of good sense at a socio-economic level and in every conceivable measure of community benefit. With the imaginative leadership and good management that we are asking the Assembly to mandate, the benefit can ripple outwards to large parts of Northern Ireland. We are asking the House to back not just a bridge but a vision.

Narrow Water, An Caol Uisce in Irish, is the point at which the estuary of the Clanrye river becomes the open sea lough of Carlingford. There was a ferry service in modern times. It is believed to have begun some 1,400 years ago to carry pilgrims heading for the grave of St Patrick at Downpatrick. Since the 1200s, the strategic choke point has been guarded by a high stone keep-tower. Its narrowing ship channel once brought trade and prosperity to the town of Newry.

The drive around Carlingford lough is undoubtedly one of the most scenic in Ireland. From Narrow Water into Newry, the drivers on each side have a clear view of one another. The bridge would knock about 10 miles off the round trip, which would save perhaps 20 to 25 minutes when you consider that the shopping traffic in Newry is heavy. However, that is only one tiny aspect of the potential of the project, and probably the least important. We must all keep our eye on the bigger vision. The Executive's Programme for Government, in line with the economic proposals that we have advanced over the years, put a major focus on the job-creation potential of tourism. In comparison with other growth areas, tourism offers several significant advantages, and probably the greatest of those is that the levers of growth are already largely in our hands; we are not dependent on major external investment. Even where infrastructural

investment is required — this is the case — the cost tends to be relatively moderate and the facilities created tend to have multiple uses.

At the community level, it is very important to note that a high proportion of tourism revenue stays in the area of spend. Of course, tourism tends to create jobs in places that other industries are unlikely to reach in the foreseeable future. In fact, tourism jobs are unlikely to be created in many major new facilities; they are more likely to come in small numbers as existing providers expand capacity. That process will start with accommodation providers increasing their average numbers of bed nights per year.

We are firm believers in that incremental approach. In my area, I am keenly aware that the people who are engaged in tourism and who hope to invest and expand in it are crying out for that project and more like it. Of course, those businesspeople are aware that bridges alone do not bring all that many people to an area, but that is where the vision must come in. This is the moment to envisage the greater Carlingford lough concept; to realise that the Mourne, the Ring of Gullion and Cooley form a natural coherent destination area of their own, like the Ring of Kerry, the Causeway Coast and the lakelands. Right at the heart of the new destination area, we are to have something new: a connecting point, a symbol, a pivot on which the whole area can turn. Our elegant new bridge at Narrow Water can become an icon and an essential marketing image for the new destination. That is the vision that people who are already in the tourism business or are considering investing in it are beginning to glimpse. It is very important that we, their representatives, can see it, too. We will be required to understand the need for intelligent, targeted marketing, and we must facilitate it. Those businesspeople, whom I meet regularly in the new local forum, are able to tell me exactly where the marketing must be targeted.

Even in these recessionary times, we are still getting six million to eight million tourists on the island of Ireland every year. Some five million of them come through Dublin, which means that they would be just 60 minutes away from our shiny new bridge, the icon of our new destination area, and about 90 miles from the heart of the Mourne, which is one of the six signature projects announced by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). I do not know how many of those five million ever make it over the border. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that we were able to attract just 1% of them as far as Carlingford lough, where most would no doubt

cross our new bridge. Those 50,000 people would, as we know, spend an average of £100 a day. That is heading for £5 million a year out of the most basic tourism offering, before we begin to consider what value we could add as the numbers build up. Where else could you even begin to look for ideas to generate that sort of revenue in a limited geographical area?

All that is doable by our effects. We can do this, working at very little cost alongside the people in the industry. It is really just a matter of getting our act together and extracting more value from what is already being done. We do not have to make major investment. We do not have to go around the world looking for people; they are already coming to Ireland. We just have to reach them and make them an offer that they cannot refuse. We do not get many opportunities like this. We do not get many chances to do such unquestionable good for everyone. It is with no sense of parochial political interest that I say that it is even hard to imagine how scarce EU funding could be put to better use than this. I challenge even the most mean-minded naysayer to find a serious downside to the Narrow Water bridge project. This project has some of the most genuine, broad-based community support on both sides of the border that I have ever seen.

I am now going to tell a wee joke, probably one of the oldest local jokes around. It is possibly worse than those of the Finance Minister. It goes like this: people should always listen to the people from Omeath; after all, they are the smartest people in Ireland. Why, I hear you say, are they the smartest people in Ireland? That is because they can always see the Point. That is Warrenpoint, for those who do not know the geography. And that is the end of the joke.

The Narrow Water bridge project naturally has the enthusiastic backing of all the Members from South Down. However, it has much more than that. It has the broadest possible backing among the people. I make no excuses whatsoever for being passionate about the project, because we are, at least, heading towards the realisation of a dream. It is not my dream; it goes back before my time in politics. It was in the dark days of the mid 1970s that far-sighted representatives — the like of PJ Bradley — and public spirited citizens came together to look at the potential for a bridge crossing at Narrow Water, at a time when our part of the country was unfortunately not best known for bridge-building. I am glad to say that many of those people are still with us. We will proudly honour them on the happy day when the tape is cut for the opening of the new bridge.

Mr Irwin: In the current financial climate, when Departments are exercising great budgetary control and seeking to direct funding to projects that are of a high priority, the Narrow Water project appears, by all accounts, like a project that would be undertaken if every other more pressing need had been met. That, as we are all aware, is not the case.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that we are now into the second year of the social investment fund without any spend, would the Member concede that there is an opportunity to put £1 million of the £40 million that has been set aside for social investment into such a project that could boost the local economy and provide jobs in tourism?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Irwin: I accept the Member's point, but I believe that there are much more pressing projects that need to be done.

I feel that it is very far-fetched to refer to the Narrow Water project as a tourism-driving, high-priority, traffic management-improving, rush-hour-beating key objective to expand and improve our infrastructure. Indeed, any publicity surrounding the bridge has focused only on tourism. Yet tourism alone is hardly a strong enough argument on which to base such an expensive undertaking.

Although some funding has been secured for the bridge project from the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), it is not a simple kit of parts from Europe that can be assembled at Narrow Water so that everyone goes away happy.

4.00 pm

Far from it. This project requires significant investment from our devolved government, and that is where greater thought is required. In recent times, the buzzword around Newry city has been "boom". I refer to the considerable levels of cross-border trade that retailers in the city have been enjoying, which are very welcome and have helped to sustain trade in Newry, particularly in times of intense competition in the retail sector. This has been greatly assisted by the completion of a successful cross-border upgrade scheme that has significantly reduced journey times between Dublin and Belfast and improved access to towns and cities along the route, including, of course, Newry city. In my opinion, there is significant benefit in maintaining Newry as a

retail destination for both the domestic and cross-border markets, and our road infrastructure developments have contributed to establishing it as a shopping hub.

I understand that the roads Minister is overseeing a southern relief road scheme for Newry and has already spent around £1 million on consultancy fees for all the various assessment procedures necessary when considering such an extensive proposal. Feasibility studies have shown that having a road that links Warrenpoint dual carriageway to the Belfast-Dublin corridor would be of significant benefit in reducing heavy goods vehicle traffic at various junctions in Newry, improving access to the port of Warrenpoint and making the city much less congested for businesses, shoppers and visitors. That is the sort of long-term infrastructure investment that we should put our weight behind — a project that will deliver real and tangible benefits for our local economy and offer greater accessibility to the region.

I remain unconvinced that the Narrow Water bridge would in any way enhance the current situation in Newry city or the tourism of the Mourne and Cooley areas. As I have said, the pitch for the bridge is based largely on tourism. Yet, tourists in the area will naturally want to visit Newry city. Why, then, build a bridge that will channel people away from the city as a destination, all in the name of taking a few minutes off travel times? Let us face it — tourists enjoy travelling. If all other pressing and infrastructure targets were achieved, including the southern relief road, the bridge would be an interesting landscape design feature. We are a long way from such an ideal set of circumstances. Therefore, I urge the Finance Minister to give long and thorough consideration to the issue and to bring forward more important key infrastructure improvements that would benefit our economy on a much wider scale.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion. The Narrow Water bridge project has caught the imagination of the people of south Down and Louth alike, as the now palpable prospect of this great connector has given them boundless hope that the economic prosperity, so often related to other tourism projects such as the Titanic Quarter or the north coast, will be harnessed to create an economic boost in our east border region.

For years, various groups and individuals have worked tirelessly to secure the viability of this project, with the working group established to

support the bridge being led by the chambers of commerce in Warrenpoint, Burren, Rostrevor and Kilkeel. Most of those people have small businesses that are crying out for the infrastructural support that is needed to develop the tourism potential of this grossly underdeveloped area.

Those small businesses are acutely aware that their very survival depends on the development of such vital tourism infrastructure. With that in mind, it is no surprise to see local businesses and the tourism industry standing shoulder to shoulder behind this proposal. The passion and zeal that they display on behalf of the people of the region are remarkable and were evident in recent months, when so many gave up their weekends to walk the roads and lane ways of south Down and Louth to collect names for a petition of support. Some of us were with them and were lucky enough to witness many thousands of local people show their support for this project. Indeed, the more than 3,000 signatures gathered in such a short time are testament to the determination of those on both sides of Carlingford Lough to finally see investment in that beautiful part of Ireland.

Located on the east coast of Ireland, Carlingford Lough nestles between the Mourne mountains to the North and the Cooleys to the South. It is an area of outstanding natural beauty that is the equal to anywhere in Ireland. With the correct infrastructure, it will be somewhere that tourists flock to in their hundreds of thousands. Connecting two historic areas of Down and Louth, the Narrow Water bridge is an important cross-border road project that would be the catalyst to developing the entire region's tourism potential by facilitating access to a spectacular area of mountain ranges, shimmering loughs and many miles of unspoilt coastline. It will provide a significant boost to an underdeveloped tourism industry, and it will help to create much-needed employment for the local construction industry.

The area has been deprived of infrastructural investment for far too long. Considering the relatively small cost of the bridge in terms of overall infrastructure spending, a bridge at Narrow Water will finally provide a great boost for the entire east coast region and will help Counties Down, Armagh and Louth to fulfil their economic and tourist potential. There is no doubt that the benefits to tourism and local commerce will see the bridge pay for itself many times over. There is also no doubt that the Narrow Water bridge makes economic and commercial sense. It will provide a vital infrastructure connection that links North and South, and that would assist economic and

tourism development in particular in an area that desperately needs new investment for jobs and growth.

The new bridge will certainly attract more visitors and create longer stays in the region. Both those factors will result in increased tourism spending in the locality, generating strong economic gains across the region. South Down and Louth desperately need those gains. The bridge will also act as a necessary catalyst to massively increase traffic between the new Mourne coastal drive and the Boyne valley drive that Louth County Council and Meath County Council have been developing. That will be a hugely positive development for our local tourism industry in places such as Strangford, Killyleagh, Downpatrick, Newcastle and Kilkeel, which have long been crying out for such infrastructural investment.

I believe that tourism can be a catalyst for economic regeneration, especially at a time when other industries such as construction and engineering are suffering. So, we need to look at what tourism provides. It can help to create and secure jobs in the hospitality and service industries, but we need to ensure that we are geared to meet the demands if we get it right. Although I am delighted that the Narrow Water bridge is coming on stream and that it will connect south Down to Carlingford, we need to do more right across the south Down area. There is a lack of hotels and beds in general in the area to cope with an influx of people. Our road infrastructure and signage need improving, and people need to be trained in appreciating the visitors who come to visit us.

Indeed, I was a visitor at a local attraction in Downpatrick on Friday evening. It welcomes more than 100,000 visitors a year, but it has been in a lengthy battle with Roads Service for basic, adequate signage. It is crucial that such blockages are removed as soon as possible if we are to continue to welcome visitors to the south Down area, whether for outdoor activities, historical and cultural tourism or just for a bit of peace and quiet. I am delighted that SEUPB has announced that the Narrow Water bridge will be funded under INTERREG II, and I congratulate everyone who is involved in the campaign, especially the various chambers of commerce.

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

Mr Hazzard: The bridge has been delivered by everyone working together on a cross-party and cross-border basis, and it highlights what can

be achieved by working together. I support the motion.

Mr McCallister: I thank colleagues for securing the debate. I will start by saying that I have some concerns about the bridge. In line with other colleagues, we would much prefer to see a southern relief road being built. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that it is not an either/or choice. My understanding is that it is not going to be an either/or choice, so, as a constituency Member, I will support the motion and the construction of the bridge. However, I will do so as long as it is not, as I have consistently said, at the expense of a southern relief road, which would offer huge benefits to Warrenpoint harbour, Newry and right across the south Down area.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for giving way and for bringing up the southern relief road. Does he not agree with me that it should not be a competition, because there are two separate issues and two separate pots of money? I am making up now for what I will say in my own contribution. Does the Member not see that it should not be about competition between the two projects?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McCallister: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and I am grateful to the Member. I am sure that the Minister will confirm that they are not competing projects, as, indeed, my colleague the Minister for Regional Development has confirmed and as his colleague the previous Minister for Regional Development would have confirmed. So, there are concerns about that, and I think that it is worth re-emphasising that how this came about did not create competing pots of money.

The other issue that has been raised with me concerns mussel fishermen's access to the upper part of Carlingford lough. I am sure that the Minister will discuss that with colleagues to see how those issues can be facilitated to deal with mussel fishermen's needs and concerns.

Moving on, Mr Deputy Speaker, as a constituency Member I welcome what we have secured. I know that there were two projects in Warrenpoint that were seeking funding. I support both those projects and, of course, the marina as well. As an MLA for the constituency I welcome this proposal and I recognise that it can benefit the wider south Down economy if we can link it in to that and bring more tourists

to the area and increase tourist spend. That is what we need to do.

We also have to recognise that it works both ways. I am sure that the bridge will not carry one-way traffic so that once you get into South Down you cannot get out of it again. We have to recognise that there may be a flow the other way, and we have to account for that. However, if we can improve the tourism potential of Warrenpoint, Kilkeel, Newcastle and across the Mourne area, that will be to the good of the South Down constituency and its small businesses and tourist enterprises. That is something to be welcomed. I am sure that the Minister will welcome anything that improves the economy or the potential of south Down.

Although I recognise that tourism drives the economy, the bridge itself is not about wider economic activity because it is primarily a project about bringing tourism in. The design of the bridge is such that it will not carry heavy goods vehicles (HGVs). It will be very much for tourism traffic. I have serious concerns about the infrastructure on the County Louth side of the bridge, which needs to be looked at. There needs to be an undertaking that it is likely to be upgraded over the next number of years.

Mr Elliott: Does the Member have any idea — are there any figures at all — as to the amount of traffic that the bridge will carry every day?

Mr McCallister: I have no idea what the amount of traffic would likely be, so I cannot clarify that. However, I am sure that, when he responds to the debate, the Minister will be happy to answer my honourable friend's question.

The bridge is very much designed for tourism traffic; it is not designed for commercial vehicles. Therefore, the economic benefit will be primarily driven by tourism in south Down, and not the wider economy. I do not want Members to think that it is going to have a huge impact on Warrenpoint harbour or on surrounding businesses, because it will not. It is a tourism project, and in that sense, if it makes a valuable contribution to tourism in south Down, linking us to and bringing more tourism from the Republic of Ireland, that is something that I welcome.

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

Mr McCallister: I hope that it succeeds in doing that, having secured the funding and planning permission.

Mr Lunn: I am happy to support the motion and I welcome the announcement, which has been a long time coming. I remember that, back in the 1970s, when I was travelling around south Down as a young insurance man, this was talked about quite actively. It was expected to happen, perhaps at a cost of £1 million instead of £25 million.

Mr McCallister has expressed some quite reasonable reservations, but at least he is going to support the building of the bridge. I listened to Mr Irwin with interest, because he seemed to think that the construction of a bridge such as this will give people an excuse not to go to Newry. If people want to go to Newry they will go to Newry. If they want to go from Carlingford to Newcastle, why should they have to go through Newry, given that we do not have the southern relief road that is being talked about?

This is a terrific scheme, but local access in both directions is good for both jurisdictions and is a perfect use of INTERREG funds. In fact, it is the first really good one that I can remember.

4.15 pm

I am a fairly frequent visitor to Carlingford and to the Cooley peninsula. For a start, it is one of the most beautiful parts of Ireland, but you are also looking across the lough at an equally beautiful part of Ireland. Why on earth would anyone object to a simple project to link the two areas? From a tourism point of view, it is a penalty kick. We should embrace it, and I would be surprised if anyone wants to do otherwise.

I read in the information pack that Mrs Foster announced recently that, in the past four years, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board spent about £6.8 million on capital infrastructure in the Mourne area. Why would you do that and not encourage people from another jurisdiction to come to it? The potential for the whole loop — across the bridge and along either side — is immense.

I also go to Donegal quite a bit, and the infrastructure created there — from Magilligan across Lough Foyle, from Bunrana across to the Fanad peninsula, and now from the new Harry Blaney bridge across to the Rosguill peninsula — has brought enormous benefit, I understand, to some of the towns in the northern parts of those peninsulas. This is good economics. It makes sense.

I really hope that there will not be any major objections from any particular party. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

I have been watching his body language for the past 20 minutes, and I think that it is fair to say that he has the look on his face that he normally reserves for debates about global warming or green energy. It remains to be seen. However, I look forward to hearing from him.

This is a case of looking a gift horse in the mouth. As I understand it, and I have just asked the SDLP, there would be a possible £1 million cost to the Northern Ireland exchequer. Frankly, this is peanuts as regards a scheme that is potentially so beneficial, is at a cost of something over €20 million, and for which we have to pay only £1 million. I am almost lost for words.

I hope that the bridge will go ahead. A major campaign has been mounted in south Down over the years. I congratulate everybody involved, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in due course.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Members for tabling the motion. I am not exactly burning with opposition to it, but I am not overcome with support either. Some things about the motion are quite bizarre, and I will talk about a few of them.

Where the motion has come from is most bizarre. It comes from the same Bench that, two weeks ago, brought us to the cusp of millions of pounds of daily fines because we have not been able to meet our targets in pension and welfare reforms, but seems to think that €17.4 million, of which £1 million comes from our Executive, can almost be tossed to the side for the sake of an 18-minute cut in the time between Omeath and Warrenpoint. We have to get ourselves back to the priorities, and there has to be consistency from the Assembly.

I accept that I am not a representative of the area, although you can probably tell by looking at me that I have enjoyed many an ice cream in the Genoa Café in Warrenpoint and visit it regularly in the summer. I know the area where the bridge will come to very well.

We have to ask ourselves honestly how necessary the project is. I accept the fact that there is a substantial amount of money from the INTERREG programme, which is to be welcomed. However, I do not get the argument that this will create a massive wave of cross-border migration that is not already happening. The fact is that, with the improvements that have been made to the A1 and the N1 motorway, there are some 20,000 daily users of that cross-border route.

I will answer Mr Elliott's point, because I have done my research, unlike the Member for South Down. It is estimated that there will be 1,036 users of the bridge a day. That will not be today or tomorrow but by 2033, and that is in comparison with the current 20,000 daily users at the cross-border junction between the A1 and N1.

What concerns me about the motion is the message that it sends out. It is very easy to say that £1 million is peanuts, and I completely accept what Mr Lunn said about that amount in construction terms. However, we all have housing estates in our constituencies. We all have people coming into our constituency offices every day of the week who have particular financial challenges. We have to be very careful about sending out a message from this place that we take an almost blasé view to this money, regardless of whether it comes from Europe or out of our own pockets. One million pounds is a lot of money and would make a huge difference to, for example, the Doury Road estate in Ballymena, which I represent and which has huge social problems. I am sure that every Member in the Chamber can recount estates in their constituency where £1 million would go a long way to fixing substandard housing and dealing with a number of other issues.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: Yes, I will.

Dr McDonnell: Does the Member accept that that is exactly the same argument that was advanced when we went to build the Waterfront Hall in Belfast? Does the Member accept that there are those who advanced the same argument about Titanic Belfast a couple of years ago, and yet it is one of the outstanding successes? Does the Member accept that you sometimes have to speculate a little bit of money to get what you want? There will always be a case for saying no. However, in this case, surely it is 90% or 95% yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Member for the intervention. I am not opposing the motion or speaking out against it. I am just trying to tease out the arguments.

To use the proposer's words, this is a symbolic North/South project. I cannot see the benefits of the bridge being overwhelming in the immediate, medium or perhaps even long term

compared with the draw that the Waterfront and Titanic Belfast have been. There was a clear economic benefit to those projects. I cannot see 1,036 users of this bridge in 20 years' time, which is a long, long way away, bringing overwhelming benefits. If that is our benchmark, we have to be realistic about what the bridge will achieve.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr D McIlveen: I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

What I will say is that this is what the INTERREG programme is for. I am not denying that, and I have no difficulty with that. However, we have the Finance Minister here, and I say to him that, rather than bog ourselves down with INTERREG —

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

Mr D McIlveen: — we should be looking at the European social fund, which creates a lot more opportunities for the people whom we represent than this bridge will.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur roimh an rún. I welcome the motion and will speak in favour of it.

First, I want to make a few points in response to the Members who have spoken already. We sit in here day and daily talking about opportunities for creating employment and about using money to create employment. Here is an opportunity to create employment. I listened to 'The Nolan Show' one day last week —

Mrs D Kelly: Shame on you.

Mr Boylan: I know, but it is a long drive from down our way.

We rolled out a programme backed by the Executive called Our Time Our Place. I read about the signatures projects, Titanic Belfast and the Giant's Causeway, in the newspapers countless times. That is fine, and we all support those projects. However, there is a beautiful area in south Down that has a good tourism product, and we are not exploiting it.

Mr Elliott: Will the Member give way?

Mr Boylan: I will, yes.

Mr Elliott: The Member is so anxious to support south Down. Does that mean he is recommending a national park for the area as well?

Mr Boylan: I will get into that in a minute. I will respond to that intervention in one minute.

From an Armagh point of view, I hold no grudge about south Down stealing St Patrick from us. There is a good tourism product there. You do not need the designation of a national park to bring tourism to the area. We should be looking at a proper tourism strategy. From reading some recent reports, I know that properties have been bought in the area, so people do see a wee bit of potential when it comes to investment in the area and what might be coming forward.

Besides all the talk about the issues that people have raised, I want to commend some people. Newry and Mourne District Council, along with Louth County Council, formed this memorandum of understanding. We are talking about empowering communities and giving more powers to local authorities, and here is a situation in which the local authority is taking the lead in trying to bring the project forward. If you were saying to me that they are asking for £20 million from the Executive, that could raise the bar, but the money required is, I think, £1 million; 95% or 99% of the money is there. It is a good project, and it presents an opportunity. I had the privilege of sitting on the East Border Region Committee, representing Armagh City and District Council. The committee supported the project and put a lot of work into it. The project should be supported.

I want to touch on the issue of the southern relief road. I thank the Member for South Down for bringing it up. There is a good economic driver in the form of Warrenpoint port. It is one of the best performing ports on the island, and it is a good economic driver. Suggestions have been brought forward, and the Department for Regional Development (DRD) has done a feasibility study. That would be another good project. I mention it because I do not want it to get into competition with the other project; it should not be that way. If it is an economic driver and it will take the traffic away — there are traffic problems in Newry city — it should be regarded as a separate project and be assessed on its own merits. It is as simple as that.

I am waiting patiently for the Minister to get up. Obviously, he will give me the opportunity to intervene in his speech if needs be. Minister, this project is asking for £1 million to get it over

the line, and there is good scope for it to provide employment in the tourism sector. There are very few capital build projects coming from the Executive and initiatives to help create employment from a public sector point of view. Here is a product that we can look at. I have seen projects in other areas of the North, so I support this project.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, LeasCheann Comhairle. Éirím le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo, agus bheirim buíochas do mo chomhghleacaithe as é a thabhairt os comhair an Tionóil. Thank you for the opportunity to speak in the debate. I thank my colleagues for tabling the motion.

Building bridges is something that mankind has done since time immemorial. It is not just about the practicality of crossing a piece of water or a deep gorge and it is not just about the creation of a piece of transport infrastructure; it about the achievement of overcoming a huge challenge that makes life better for a community. It makes life better for them by giving access, by linking neighbours, by enabling trade and, most importantly, by expanding horizons.

Mr McIlveen is right that a bridge is a huge symbol: it is a huge symbol for humanity.

Settlements have grown into villages, towns and cities around fording places and bridges, so bridges are a proven stimulus to growth and development.

4.30 pm

Building this bridge will link Northern Ireland and the Republic, and it can be seen as a local piece of infrastructure that will link County Down to County Louth. It will facilitate local people and encourage good neighbourliness. It can also be seen as a valuable piece of tourism infrastructure that will open up the kingdom of Mourne and beyond to tourists from one of the most densely populated areas of this island, including the greater Dublin area. It will attract visitors in greater numbers and create jobs in tourism in Warrenpoint, Rostrevor, Kilkeel, Annalong, Newcastle, the Brontë country and the other St Patrick's country around Downpatrick. It will send out a very strong message locally, nationally and internationally of good neighbourliness between the two parts of this island, and that will, in turn, enhance Northern Ireland as a destination for tourism and, indeed, for foreign direct investment.

We often hear parties in this House say that they want good neighbourliness between the North and the South on this island. We hear them say that they want to attract more tourists from the Republic into Northern Ireland, and they also say that the Republic is a growing market for tourism. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment said that.

We want to send out a strong message to all communities that we have moved beyond the Troubles of the past decades. This bridge gives us the opportunity to do all those things at very little cost to the public purse here.

Why should we spurn such an opportunity and stifle the growth of good neighbourliness? Why would we decline the chance to grow our tourism numbers and the tourism industry? Why should we seek to send out the wrong message that we are still stuck in petty squabbles that will not allow us to grow and develop and that we will not build a bridge?

This is a time for leadership: leadership that will encourage good neighbourliness; leadership that will bring an important impetus to our tourism industry; leadership that will create jobs at a time of recession; and leadership that will send out a strong positive message locally, nationally, whichever way you interpret that, and internationally. The message will be that we have bridged the troubled waters and moved on to a better place.

Isaac Newton once said:

"We build too many walls and not enough bridges".

God knows, Mr Deputy Speaker, we have built enough walls here in Northern Ireland.

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

Mr D Bradley: Let us, for a change, build a bridge, and build it at Narrow Water.

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I assure you that I will not burst into a Simon and Garfunkel song after that contribution.

I will say at the very start of this response that I will not support the motion, and I will outline some of the reasons why. Indeed, it is rather unfortunate for the project and for the whole INTERREG selection process that we are having this debate today.

I want to clear up a couple of issues, and I do not really want to get into the project itself or the detail of it for reasons that I will elaborate on in a moment or two. First, although the emphasis has been on the tourist potential of the bridge, I draw Members' attention to the economic appraisal. Some Members who spoke probably know about that better than I do, but the main reason given for the bridge is not the tourist potential. Indeed, the second most important reason given is not the tourist potential. The appraisal states that it is unlikely that any large proportion of additional visitors who come to the area will be specifically attributable to the existence of the bridge. So let us knock on the head at the very start the idea that this will open some golden era of tourism potential.

The second issue is the cost of the project. I repeat that it is not the case that, for £1 million, you get a bridge. First, the amount of money that will come from Departments in Northern Ireland is £2·8 million, but, more importantly, until this project is completed, the risk of the whole cost of the bridge rests with the Executive in Northern Ireland. If this bridge were not completed on time, with the final bills in by June 2015, we would lose all of the money that had been put into this project because we would have missed the European deadline. That is an important point when it comes to some of the issues that I want to talk about.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will, yes.

Mr Allister: As it is INTERREG money, there is not only the contribution that the EU will make but the contribution that the various Departments will make. Is the Minister saying that, on top of the £2·8 million that we would collectively contribute in Northern Ireland, there could be the additional risk to whatever the sum is that the EU commits because of non-completion? In other words, delivery lies at the heart of this. What is the total risk factor in both EU and local finance that Northern Ireland could be required to pay back in penalties to Brussels?

Mr Wilson: The total costs attributable to Northern Ireland are £10·8 million, £8·1 million of which would come from INTERREG money and £2·8 million from departmental match funding. Before anyone points out to me that the two add up to £10·9 million and says that I cannot count, those are the round figures. That is the total exposure, and that is important when it comes to some of the points that I want to make.

Mr Elliott: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Wilson: I will give way, yes.

Mr Elliott: The Minister said that £2·8 million would come from Northern Ireland Departments. Will he outline which Departments? On several occasions during the debate, a £1 million exposure from the Northern Ireland Executive was mentioned.

Mr Wilson: It is £2·8 million, and most of it will come from DRD's roads budget.

I will make it clear why I will not support the motion. First, the final decision on this has not been made. The Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) is the accountable Department. Once a decision has been made by the programme steering committee, which it was on 24 October, all the paperwork comes to the Department of Finance and Personnel and all the relevant documentation is sought. We will look at the costs, the benefits, the value for money, the deliverability and the risk before we make a final decision.

Most Members will accept that it would be most inappropriate for me as Minister to make a judgement to support or oppose the project before all of that relevant work has been done by my Department. The way in which this application has been handled is not helpful to the process, and, indeed, it could present considerable risks.

The first reason why I will not support this is that it is my job to make up my mind once I have received information assessments by the officials — the professionals in my Department — on all the relevant documentation and all the relevant issues. However, the one thing that I can say is that no one has ever been able to accuse me of making up my mind on the basis of whether I like who proposes or opposes a motion, or on the basis of where it comes from. Unlike Ministers from Sinn Féin and the SDLP, I have not had my judgement called into question by the courts. I do not intend for that to happen, and, for that reason, I will not be making a prejudgement on the issue today.

A second point to this concerns me. I am concerned because of the risk to which it puts Northern Ireland money, and, indeed, the whole process. I have never had an application for any European money, whether INTERREG or Peace, for which has been the degree of political interest, involvement and dabbling that there has been with this application. The fact

that we are debating this motion is but the tip of the iceberg.

Let me just give a bit of the history of this matter. When the application was first made, it was turned down, and 12 others were accepted. It was turned down basically on the issue of whether it was deliverable. Quite rightly, there is an appeals mechanism, which people have every right to benefit from. That decision was overturned at the appeal. The main issue was whether the money could be spent on time. There were considerable risks. There is the pre-qualification period, when the firms that are eligible to tender would be looked at, followed by the tender period, and then by the building period. Even by a modest assessment, all those were going to take the project well beyond the June 2015 deadline. I do not mean by weeks or even by months; I mean by many months.

Do not forget that, by the assessment stage, there had been considerable political lobbying on this. Indeed, there had been a list of people who had sought, unusually enough, to —

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister give away?

Mr Wilson: No. I will give way in a moment or two. Let me finish the point. There had been considerable political lobbying by SDLP representatives, officials, etc, all of which, thankfully, SEUPB declined. However, considerable political interest had been expressed in the whole project. When it came to the steering committee's doing the pre-assessment, suddenly the marks on this most vital of issues were increased by 120%. It is reasonable for me, as Minister, to ask: how come the steering committee got it so wrong the first time, or how come it revised its opinion so dramatically the second time? This is an important issue. If the committee got it wrong, we will lose not simply the amount of money that has not been spent; we will lose all the money. Not only will we put public money in Northern Ireland at risk but we will put other projects at risk, which may get knocked off the list.

There is another issue. I see that the Environment Minister is in the Chamber. This was an article 31 planning application, so it was decided and signed off by the planning Minister. He may want to correct me on this, but we have never had an article 31 planning application, with all the sensitivities that are involved in this one, dealt with so quickly. It just so happened that the Minister signed it off two days before the committee made the decision. Given the lobbying that was done, one has to ask: how

come an article 31 planning application on this issue was determined so quickly?

When it came to the steering committee's decision on 24 October, the chairman addressed the committee about confidentiality. However, some of those who were on the committee decided to leak a confidential decision. I can only guess their motives. Before the meeting was over, the message was out that the Committee had made the decision. Again, for what motive, other than perhaps to put some pressure on to make sure that it went through? And then, of course —

4.45 pm

Mr Attwood: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wilson: Since I have mentioned the Minister, yes, I will.

Mr Attwood: I thank the Member for giving way. First, he needs to check his facts, quite a few of which have been in error during his contribution. One of the facts that he needs to check is this: I did not make any decision two days before the SEUPB decided to fund the project. That is wrong, and I invite the Member to correct the record in Hansard, because it is wrong. The more substantive point, of course, is this: I do not know whether Sammy has his ears open at all Executive meetings, but he will recall —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions are meant to be brief. In addition, I am advised that it is not in order for two Ministers to speak during the one debate.

Mr Wilson: All I can say, and these are the facts —

Mr Attwood: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not speaking as a Minister. I am speaking as an MLA who has been asked to confirm the situation regarding a decision that I took as Minister. Therefore, as an MLA, I am correcting the record, and I ask you to give me the freedom to make that correction.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Clearly, there was reference to your decision as a Minister earlier on.

Mr Wilson: The facts are as follows: a planning application for the bridge was made on 9 February, and the Committee was notified before 24 October that the Minister had made a decision on the planning application. That must

be one of the quickest article 31s that there has ever been in Northern Ireland. I draw that fact to the attention of the House because it backs up the point that I want to make, which is this: the application was dealt with by the Minister — it was dealt with very shortly — and, indeed, it was signed off on the day that the Committee met, which was 24 October 2012. We have to take those points into consideration.

This has nothing to do with the content of the application itself, but I believe that it is important to have a thorough investigation of the application process. At the end of the day, I will make the decision following the advice that I am given by the economists in my Department as to whether this represents value for money and whether there is any danger.

The last thing that I will say is this: I believe that there is a political smell around this application. I believe that it is wrong that it was brought to the House today —

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

Mr Wilson: For those reasons, and the fact that I am not going to prejudge any decision that I have to make as Minister, I oppose the motion.

Mr Rogers: Forget about the politicking, this project is about one thing: jobs and the economy. When we met Minister Foster earlier as part of our lobbying, her final comment was, "If it is good for Northern Ireland, then I am for it." What a difference an investment of over £20 million would make to south Down.

Construction is a target sector for job creation, and everyone is aware of the Construction Employers Federation multiplier: that every £1 invested creates a payback of £2.84 to the economy. This is a win-win situation for construction, hospitality and the retail sector in south Down and further afield.

Anyone who fears the amount of the EU spending on the project will be pleased to learn that, almost three years ago, prior to the approvals being granted, a Newry businessman, Mr Colm Meehan, indicated his commitment that, should the Narrow Water bridge project proceed, he was prepared to invest £25 million in developing a hotel in close proximity to the site of the new bridge. Add to that an £18 million hotel in Rostrevor and a £10 million hotel in Glassdrumman. Those hotels will provide construction jobs and, when opened, the staff will be recruited in the south Down and Omeath/Carlingford area.

Europe will also be pleased to learn that its €17.4 million investment will not only be matched but added to with an extra 43% of local money by Mr Meehan, whom I compliment for his initiative. I am certain that many other businesses will be willing to invest in the region as the project develops. Other entrepreneurs such as Gordon Coulter, Sam Hamilton, Malachy McCourt, Liam Murphy and William James Smith, to name but a few, have already shown their commitment or are poised to do so.

The Warrenpoint Harbour Authority is poised to welcome its first cruise ship, and hopefully the marina will be the next port. Chambers of commerce right around the coast; towns and villages such as Newry, Warrenpoint, Burren, Rostrevor, Kilkeel, Newcastle and Downpatrick; organisations and businesses such as the Kilkeel cookery school, Kilkeel Development Association, Rathfriland regeneration and Castlewellan regeneration; the caravan parks; our retailers; our farmers; and above all our construction industry need this to happen.

The bridge is vital to unlocking the tourism potential of south Down. One does not have to go too far to see how Carlingford and the Cooley peninsula have been transformed as a tourist destination over the past 10 years. This project will become not only the gateway to south Down, Brontë country, Mourne country or St Patrick's country but to Northern Ireland.

Last year, the Republic increased its tourist traffic while we are still lagging behind. I believe that the bridge, which would be just over an hour from Dublin Airport, would provide that vital link. Get people into south Down and then move them around Northern Ireland.

The bridge will become a focal point. From Downpatrick to the Boyne valley, there is much to attract visitors. There is tourism potential from Finn McCool to Cú Chulainn and from the Táin to the majestic Mournes. The bridge will be a new beginning. It will put our region on the tourist map and, in doing so, sustain existing jobs and create many new jobs that are essential to kick-starting our economy.

There is a strong enterprise culture here that is only matched by good-natured, friendly people who are well capable of maximising this golden opportunity.

In Karen's contribution, she pointed out that our Programme for Government, in line with economic proposals —

Mr D Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned the Programme for

Government. I am sure that he is aware that the Government commitment is to process new article 31 applications in six months. That is precisely what happened in Narrow Water, and it will probably happen again in other article 31 applications. Is it not strange that the Minister who voted for that is now objecting to it?

Mr Rogers: Thank you for that. Mrs McKeivitt said that our Programme for Government, in line with economic proposals, puts a major focus on job creation and the potential for tourism. We have Titanic Belfast, the Causeway centre and the City of Culture in Derry. Look at the minimal figure that the Executive would have to contribute, compared with what it had to contribute for those aforementioned projects.

This project was conceived 40 years ago. Negotiating this magnificent gift to the local communities required a lot of research, time and effort by both Governments, Louth County Council, Newry and Mourne District Council, the East Border Region, INTERREG and the SEUPB, but, most importantly, as Chris Hazzard said, it had cross-community support.

In his contribution, Dominic said that he sees the bridge as a good news story for Ireland, North and South, and one that will enhance our standing internationally.

William Irwin accepted Mrs Kelly's point and talked quite a bit about the southern relief road. This project could reduce some of the congestion in Newry.

John McCallister said that he is quite happy to support the project if it makes a valuable contribution to tourist traffic.

Chris Hazzard talked about community support for the bridge and the tourist potential, and he said that it would be a catalyst for economic recovery. He also talked about the lack of beds and the road infrastructure. As I outlined, people are ready to address the lack of beds.

Trevor Lunn said that people should embrace the project. He drew my attention to the £6.4 million investment in the Mournes, and Minister Foster and Minister Kennedy were there when improvements to the Silent Valley were opened up.

David McIlveen was not burning with desire, but he was not burning with opposition. He liked the ice cream in the Genoa, but I suggest that he have a look at the ice cream in Carlingford. It is buzzing.

Cathal Boylan spoke about the opportunity to create jobs. We have a good tourist product, and I was a bit surprised to get so much support from an Armagh man, but I remembered that the bridge would be quite close to the Armagh border.

I come to the Minister. I was disappointed but did not expect to hear anything new. He kept saying, "Can this be delivered?" Well, you are the man in that position. I welcome that you will not make a prejudgement.

I thank everybody for their contribution and the Business Committee for selecting the motion for debate. Mr Deputy Speaker, ladies and gentlemen, we have lost a generation to emigration, but the next generation will judge us very harshly if this Assembly does not make this bridge a reality and does not do it soon. I urge everyone in the Chamber to support the motion and begin to kick-start our economy. Now is our time, and our place is Narrow Water.

5.00 pm

Question put.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 47; Noes 38.

AYES

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

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr D Bradley and Mr McDevitt

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr Anderson, Mr Bell, Ms P Bradley, Ms Brown, Mr Buchanan, Mr Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Cree, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr D McIlveen, Miss

M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr McQuillan and Mr G Robinson

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the significant social and economic benefits, particularly for tourism, that will flow from the proposed Narrow Water bridge project in south Down; notes that the project has obtained planning consent on both sides of the border; welcomes the support of the Irish Government for the project and the Special EU Programmes Body's decision to allocate very substantial funding for the bridge; calls on the Executive to make explicit their support for the project; and further calls on the Minister of Finance and Personnel to make clear his commitment to the successful delivery of the Narrow Water bridge project and to take the lead, along with his counterparts in the Irish Government, in ensuring that any remaining finance required to complete the funding package is committed immediately.

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

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Mental Health Services: Omagh

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes. The Minister will have 10 minutes in which to respond. All other Members who wish to speak will have seven to eight minutes.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Business Committee for selecting the topic for debate in the House. I also thank the Minister for giving of his time to listen and respond to the debate.

In West Tyrone, and Omagh in particular, health services have never been far from the hearts of the people. We saw that clearly demonstrated in the discussions about, and final determination of, the location of the new acute hospital for the south-west in Enniskillen. That was a difficult time for the people of Omagh and County Tyrone, who felt that the largest rural county in Northern Ireland had been stripped of its life-saving acute services, placing them in a vulnerable position.

It was painful to watch the excellent services that had been built up at the Tyrone County Hospital being moved to the South West Acute Hospital. It was a time of anxiety, and it was a very trying and, indeed, tearful time for many staff, patients and others. However, the face of the health service changes and things move on.

At that time, we were given a commitment by the then Health Minister, Mr Shaun Woodward. I had many meetings and debates with Mr Woodward, and he said, "Look, I did not get you the acute hospital in Omagh but what I did get you was a local enhanced hospital, which alongside it will have a new healthcare centre and a new acute centre for mental health." The facilities that were to be in that acute centre were outlined: mental health facilities; an acute adult mental health ward; psychiatric intensive care; an acute mental health ward for older people; a challenging behaviour unit for the under-65s and the same for over-65s; an addiction treatment unit; psychosexual services; and mental health day services.

5.15 pm

Not only did Mr Woodward give that commitment, but the previous Health Minister, Mr McGimpsey, further strengthened it on several occasions. From various press statements and Hansard reports, I know that he continually referred to the commitment to delivering and providing that centre in Omagh. Most recently, on 5 October 2011, when my colleague the Health Minister, Edwin Poots, was down in Omagh, he took the initiative to release the money for the first phase of the local enhanced hospital. He advised that phase 2 would include the mental health unit at a cost of £23 million and an ambulance station and back-office accommodation at £13 million. All that was on his and his Department's agenda. So, we have a threefold commitment from three different Health Ministers to the new local enhanced hospital in Omagh, which takes in the mental health unit and the other services. There is an old proverb that says that a threefold cord is not easily broken. I hope that that threefold commitment is not easily broken but held on to.

Recommendations arising from the 'Transforming Your Care' consultation document have caused further concern and anxiety about the delivery of the acute mental health facility at Omagh. We believe that the arguments that are used for its relocation to the South West Acute Hospital site do not stack up. Those arguments have been made without any robust rationale or evidence for such a relocation. 'Transforming Your Care' recommends that acute mental health services be located beside or in close proximity to an acute hospital. However, since 2009, when the acute medical services were removed from the Tyrone County Hospital, the acute mental health services continue to be delivered at the Tyrone and Fermanagh hospital to safe and effective standards. Indeed, when the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) approved the original business case, which included the acute adult mental health with psychiatric intensive care and acute mental health for older people, those services were deemed suitable for inclusion at the enhanced local hospital at Omagh. That happened with the clear understanding at that time that the new hospital would not include acute medical care. Therefore, we have to ask: what has changed between then and now? We are getting some recommendations and proposals that say that acute mental health services cannot be sited unless they are beside somewhere that has acute medical services. The rationale behind de-stigmatising mental health by integrating it into an acute hospital

setting is very weak, and it fails to convince anyone that real thought was given to the matter.

The proposed co-location of mental health services from Omagh serves only to undermine the future delivery and viability of other mental health services in Omagh, such as older people's mental health and addiction services. Such diminution of services is constantly undermining the feasibility and sustainability of the entire new enhanced hospital project in Omagh, which the Health Department and the Western Health and Social Care Trust have always referred to as the third leg of the clinical network stool that is required to ensure the Western Trust's full delivery of services in that area. Any proposed co-location to the South West Acute Hospital would also require a newbuild, as the facility currently cannot provide the accommodation that is required for effective mental health service delivery. We all know that, being a PPI project, the cost of such a newbuild would far exceed that of building the mental health facility in Omagh, as set out in the original business case as part of the project delivery. Therefore, there is no appetite in Omagh or among the providers of mental health services in Omagh for the facility's relocation to the South West Acute Hospital site or to anywhere other than Omagh.

In April this year, in a press statement, as well as in recent meetings since then, the Western Trust affirmed that Omagh was its preferred location for the acute mental health beds. Clinicians have also spoken of their support for remaining at Omagh. Therefore, I believe that it would be a detrimental step to relocate the service to anywhere other than the new hospital in Omagh. The people of Omagh and west Tyrone have sacrificed much by very reluctantly accepting the removal of their acute services and hospital. At that time, a line was drawn in the sand to say: enough, and no more. Any relocation of mental health services would be a further injustice and, I believe, a step too far. Therefore, Minister, I trust that the voice of the Western Health and Social Care Trust clinicians, the health professionals and the people will prevail and be taken into account as you seek to decide on the matter in future days.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, as an seans labhairt inniu sa díospóireacht seo. I thank the Minister for attending the Adjournment debate. I appreciate that very much. I commend Tom Buchanan for tabling the motion. I had the very same thought, and had tabled a request for this debate, which may have happened sequentially next Tuesday. No harm in Tom getting there

first. I very much support what he is trying to achieve.

I want to express my serious concern at proposals contained in 'Transforming Your Care' regarding the future of acute mental health services in Omagh. I know that the Minister will say that it is a more general regional thing that is being taken forward, but we in Omagh have particular cause for concern. The proposals have caused considerable anxiety in the area, perhaps exemplified by the headline in the 'Tyrone Herald' on Monday 16 October, on the controversial proposal to remove Tyrone and Fermanagh facilities:

"Axe looms on acute mental health care".

This discussion, or debate, dominated a meeting called by the Patient and Client Council in the Tara Centre in Omagh on Wednesday 7 November. In fairness to the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), and our health authorities generally, a very strong team was put forward on the evening to address the issue and listen to people's concerns. The meeting included the presence of Mr John Compton, which was appreciated. That single issue dominated the meeting. It became clear that evening, and since, that the Health and Social Care Board has one view on the matter and the key provider of health services in our area, the Western Trust, has an entirely different view on the future provision of acute psychiatric care and mental health services in our area. That divergence is worth noting.

I have in my possession a copy of the 'Mental Health Acute Care Review April 2012', a document that was submitted, as I understand it, by the Western Health and Social Care Trust to the Department for its consideration. It might be the case that the trust is an elevated consultee in a matter such as this, but I do think that the view of the trust needs to be taken very, very seriously in this debate. Mr Buchanan mentioned the local enhanced hospital. The trust's document mentions, on page 7, an overemphasis on a medical model. The trust says that it really is more important to integrate mental health inpatient care with the community it serves, rather than with medicine. That thinking emanates from the Department of Health itself, in 1994. Therefore, I think that the argument for co-location with an acute hospital is being overstated; for what purpose, I am not sure.

A look at the bulk of the population shows what everyone knows: Omagh is the populated place. The district has more than 50,000 people, and the town has 25,000. If mental

health services were integrated with the community that they serve, they would not be moving away from Omagh at all.

Nobody seems to buy the argument that the idea behind co-locating mental health and acute health services is about ending stigma. In fact, other esteemed people involved in health politics say that the current arrangement, where there is lots of accommodation and gardens for healing, and so on, at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, involve no stigma whatsoever. Indeed, Professor Pat D'Arcy explained to me privately that he thought that that argument was very outdated.

There is, of course, strong professional nursing experience in Omagh at this time; a tradition that I think is over 100 years old. Were mental health services to be relocated away from Omagh and into Enniskillen, there would be a problem with accommodation at the new hospital. The accommodation needed is not there. It would involve making a commitment to a newbuild, and I am sure that the Department of Health does not want to undertake a newbuild commitment because the accommodation is not there.

I emphasise again that Bamford said that acute inpatient mental health services should be provided as part of an integrated model of crisis facilities, with locally accessible units. I think that the local enhanced hospital is the model that can best serve that purpose. If there is a reason other than health — if there is a political reason for this — somebody should say so, because people who are analysing this do not get, absorb or understand the argument being made for mental health services to be taken out of Omagh. The evidence is not there. The case is not being made. The only campaigner for this is the Health and Social Care Board, because the community in Fermanagh or anywhere else are not. It is not necessary to take the service away. I think that it is acting in bad faith. The Omagh community needs confidence building, and the Western Health and Social Care Trust has worked very hard, as has the Department of Health, at building confidence with the Omagh community following the loss of acute health services. No agenda is served by taking this proposal forward in the context of Omagh.

Mr Hussey: I thank Councillor Buchanan for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. I also thank the Minister for being present. I declare an interest in that my late father was a psychiatric nurse based in the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh, and I still have relations who work in the field of

mental health. I also put on record my praise for our hard-working mental health staff in Omagh; their professionalism is second to none.

In Omagh, we have a feeling that if cuts are to be made to health resources, whether everyday or mental health services, we are seen as the prime target. We find the Compton review perhaps the most galling of all, when one considers that John Compton was for a time the chief executive of the Sperrin Lakeland Trust and is well aware of how Omagh people feel about healthcare. Today, mental health is the specific issue. So I begin by referring to a letter submitted to one of our local papers by Andy McKane of UNISON:

"The people of Omagh district must avail of the opportunity to submit consultations in response to the 'Transforming Your Care' proposal. The document has proposed to remove psychiatric admissions, currently in the Tyrone & Fermanagh Hospital, and relocate them to the South Western Acute Hospital. This is a U-turn on the promise given by Michael McGimpsey when he was Health Minister and brings into doubt the second phase of the new hospital promised at the Tyrone and Fermanagh site.

The reasons cited in the proposal are to reduce stigma and have the facility beside an acute hospital. Reasons which were not considered important when removing acute hospital status from the Tyrone County Hospital in 2009, when health officials stated that adequate provision would be put in place for the people of Tyrone. If these provisions can service the population in the local area, surely they can also service the local 26-bed psychiatric unit.

Unison is encouraged by the cross-party support of Omagh District Council and heartened by the commitment of the Western Trust to maintain services in Omagh. This is a very worrying time for the people of the Omagh area who have seen service stripped from county town and relocated to Enniskillen and Altnagelvin. There is also concern about the future of palliative care in Tyrone County Hospital and long-stay beds in Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital."

5.30 pm

Omagh District Council is also opposed to the proposed changes on a cross-party basis and stated in a letter to the chair of the trust on 31 October 2012:

"At both the Joint Liaison Group meeting of 23rd October 2012 and the Council's Health Care Committee of 30th October 2012, Members voiced their concerns with the proposals outlined, and, in particular with the proposal to relocate acute mental health to the new South West Acute Hospital and the total omission of the integral role of the new enhanced local hospital in Omagh will play in the future delivery of health care provision.

At the Joint Liaison Group meeting Trust Officials were in agreement with Members that the consultation document neither provides a rationale nor evidence to justify a decision to relocate acute mental health services near an acute hospital and in fact undermines the future delivery of other mental health services in Omagh such as older persons mental health and addiction services. Additionally Officials highlighted that such relocation would require a new build at the South West Acute Hospital given that the current hospital could not provide the accommodation required for effective mental health service delivery. It was also noted that as the South West Acute Hospital is a PFI project, the exorbitant costs of providing a new build is most certainly not in keeping with the underlying cost cutting requirements of the Transforming Your Care proposals.

It is also important to note that since the removal of acute services from the Tyrone County Hospital in 2009 acute mental health services have continued to be safely and appropriately delivered at the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, in addition, the Trust's own affirmation in April of this year that Omagh is its preferred location for the retention of acute mental health beds confirms the Trust's confidence that the service continues to be safe and meeting the needs of the population of the West."

Mr Buchanan referred to some of the meetings that we had about the hospital in Omagh. In fact, when I first got elected to Omagh District Council, it was one of the major issues that we were all involved in. It was, as Mr McElduff told me at the time, team West Tyrone. West Tyrone MLAs of all political shades united in opposition to the removal of health services from Omagh, and here we are again today.

When the Western Trust was established, we had major difficulties in the Omagh area with establishing any trust with the trust. It is not often that I praise the Western Health and Social Care Trust, but, on this occasion, it and

Omagh District Council speak with one voice. We cannot allow any further removal of services from Omagh. John Compton has got this badly wrong, and Omagh says no to any attempt to remove acute mental health services from the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital in Omagh. We as politicians from the local area are united on that. Omagh District Council is united. The Western Health and Social Care Trust is united, and the staff of the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital — the most important people involved in the issue — are with us.

Patients must be given the respect that they deserve. The staff must be given the respect that they deserve. The services are safely provided in Omagh. Every opportunity was taken to remove services from Omagh by using the magic word "safety". There is no question of safety in this document. Omagh says no, and we say it with one loud voice here this evening. Acute mental health services cannot be removed from Omagh.

Mr Byrne: I, like others, want to thank Tom Buchanan for bringing the topic to the House. I thank the Minister for being in attendance and also for having a private meeting with Tom and me some weeks ago. Some 25 years ago, Omagh had three hospitals: the Omagh General Hospital; the Tyrone County Hospital; and the Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital, which had over 100 years of established practice and good delivery of mental health services.

Unfortunately, again, as Mr Hussey said, the people of Omagh have to fight to retain their services, particularly the health service. Omagh was promised an enhanced local hospital complex that would present a new model for local healthcare delivery. It was to consist of three elements: the Omagh hospital with a range of services, an Omagh health and care centre — essentially a GP centre — and a centre for mental health with a full range of related services.

The mental health centre was being designed to create a holistic healing environment that would lead to the modernisation and enhancement of current mental health practice. This falls, as Mr McElduff said, into the Bamford review of mental health and learning disability. According to the website www.newhospitals.westerntrust.hscni.net, the centre for mental health is to have approximately 100 beds and provide acute mental health services for the adult population in the south-west of Northern Ireland. It is also to offer psychiatric intensive care facilities for those with challenging behaviours and an addiction treatment unit. It is fair to say that

Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital has built up an excellent expertise in addiction treatments over the past 30 years. Nowhere in the information on that website does it state that the service needs to be beside an acute hospital. This service was planned knowing the situation with acute services in Omagh.

The 'Transforming Your Care' report puts the emphasis on those with mental health problems being cared for in the community. Emphasis is put on carers and their role in helping and supporting the mental health patient. If that is the case, it is disturbing that the report then advocates that those people will now have to be taken out of an environment in which they have some continuity with carers and put into an environment that will not meet those needs. That seems to be a contradiction.

Omagh has been a centre for mental health care for well over 100 years. In fact, it was the site of a teaching hospital for the western area. There is much expertise among nursing and medical staff in the Omagh area and a ready availability of well-educated and trained staff who have kept the services to the forefront through challenging times. Some people with mental health issues have difficulties with addiction, and, as I said, the staff in Omagh have an excellent track record and expertise in that field.

Mental health has been the Cinderella of the health service for many years. People with mental health issues should be treated as equal to any other person with a physical illness and have the treatment that is best for them, as opposed to what is seen as a financial decision.

In a question for written answer on 16 October 2012, I asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his position on the provision of a modern mental health unit at the proposed new hospital in Omagh. In his reply, he said:

"No decisions have been taken yet and the Health and Social Care Board is seeking views and comments on the proposals contained in the document to inform the way forward."

I accept the Minister's integrity, but I am not so sure about officials in his Department or the Health and Social Care Board.

Public confidence in Omagh, west Tyrone and County Tyrone as a whole has been badly dented in the past by the way in which government has treated us, particularly in relation to health. Those of us who preached

acceptance of the local enhanced hospital were pilloried at the time, but we felt that it was better to get half a loaf than no bread. This issue is one of public confidence, and the Executive must stand by the promises that they made to our people. The 'Transforming Your Care' document is bizarre, with its inherent contradictions as to whether a modern mental health unit needs to have acute services alongside it. That is not proven anywhere, nor is there medical evidence to support it. That begs the question: what is the game?

I support all that has been said. I hope that the Minister can give us some comfort in the days and weeks ahead.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am grateful for the opportunity to hear the views of the Members on this issue. As Health Minister, my vision is to ensure that the services from health and social care providers meet the needs of patients, clients and local communities.

I recognise that some people are anxious and concerned about the future of our services, especially in the present financial climate. I understand and share that concern, but with strong leadership, involving people, and effective planning, I believe that the challenges we face can be met.

The Bamford review of mental health and learning disability recommends that people with a mental illness should be treated at home in the community unless there is a clinical reason not to do so. Admission to hospital should only occur when people become acutely ill and no other options are appropriate. At the same time, Bamford recognised that hospitals were not appropriate places for people to live once their treatment was complete and recommended that all long-stay patients should be resettled into more appropriate accommodation in the community.

Transforming Your Care (TYC) supports the Bamford vision for the treatment and care of people who are mentally ill. Under Transforming Your Care, my aim is to provide a full range of health and social care services outside and beyond the acute sector, in the community, thus supporting an increasing number of people to live independently, preferably in their own homes, for longer, promoting good health and reducing unnecessary hospitalisation.

I want to challenge the traditional emphasis on hospital care, especially long-stay institutional care. One of Transforming Your Care's key

proposals is to reduce the number of inpatient beds and the number of people living in institutional care. This will be done only by developing alternative community-based services.

One of my key objectives is to develop an enhanced role for primary and community care, working hand in hand with healthcare providers and patients, in designing and delivering consistently high quality, safe and needs-based care in community settings.

I believe that truly high-quality health and social care services can be achieved only when properly resourced and designed around the needs of the people who use them. We need to use limited resources wisely, identifying savings for reinvestment in modern, efficient services.

Unfortunately, the financial position in the health and social care sector is significantly constrained, and I am actively looking at alternative funding options to allow for the delivery of this modern healthcare model across the Province.

Patients are entitled to receive the right care in the right place at the right time. They are at the centre of my policies and priorities. The design and delivery of services that meet their needs and expectations is what really matters to patients. Community care improves the quality of life for patients and may release valuable resources to further enhance community services.

Transforming Your Care proposes changes to the way in which health services are delivered in local communities. The need to provide the right care in the right place at the right time is a key principle of the change.

One of the proposals is to develop six inpatient mental health units in Northern Ireland, two of which will be in the Western Trust area. The document makes the point that, to reduce stigma and ensure there is good access to acute care, it is necessary to locate mental health hospitals close to acute hospital provision, recognising that this may not be possible in all circumstances. However, this proposal, like all the proposals, is subject to a public consultation exercise, and no decisions have yet been taken. The public consultation will enable the public and all key stakeholders to contribute their views to the future design and configuration of services.

The decision on the exact location can be finalised only when the business case has been developed. The business case will look at the

site options and costs and will be used to determine the most appropriate option as regards location, value for money and service need.

When I met Omagh District Council in October 2011, I confirmed that service provision would not change until new service provision had been established. I also advised that the proposed phase 2 of the Omagh hospital project would have to be in line with Bamford and the outworkings of the review of acute inpatient mental health provision across Northern Ireland.

We can already see the impact of better community mental health services. Home treatment teams are reducing the need for people to go into psychiatric hospitals, and when people do need inpatient care, they can be discharged more quickly because we have the necessary support services in the community.

Following the publication of 'Transforming Your Care' in December 2011, draft population plans have been produced by local commissioning groups in liaison with the health and social care trusts and others together with an overarching strategic implementation plan. The draft plans provide a basis to take forward a number of TYC proposals, particularly in respect of service configuration and the shift of services from secondary care to primary and community care.

5.45 pm

The draft plans were subject to quality assurance work over the summer, and that work is being concluded. This is a critical process involving input from a range of stakeholders. It will ensure that the draft population plans and strategic implementation plan provide a sound basis for how our Health and Social Care services will be delivered in future.

As I said, any decisions on the future configuration and provision of services will be informed by the ongoing consultation exercise, which is supported by a wide range of engagement events, allowing patients, service users and the wider public to have their say. Specific proposals will also be subject to the business case process and further consultation before any final decision is made.

As outlined earlier, my overall aim is to bring about change in our Health and Social Care system and deliver better prevention and early intervention so that care is more patient-centred, is provided closer to home, is resilient

and safe, and delivers the best possible outcomes well into the future to meet the needs of the citizens of Northern Ireland. I am strongly committed to the principle that Health and Social Care services should be driven by, and responsive to, the needs of patients, clients and their carers.

My vision for the future of Health and Social Care is one in which we drive up the quality of services, improve outcomes and enhance the patient experience. I want to ensure that service users are at the heart of everything that we do. Therefore, I am happy to give full consideration to all the various issues that will arise when it comes to providing psychiatric care and help in the south-west area. We will take full cognisance of what the Health and Social Care Board and the Western Trust have to say. We will also pay attention to the community's wishes.

All of this will be taken in conjunction with the costs, and so forth, associated with any newbuild and the development of any such facility. I can assure the House that this matter is still in play, irrespective of what TYC says on it. We have a lot of other issues to take into account over and above that report.

Adjourned at 5.47 pm.

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

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

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Access to Finance Strategy: Loan Funds

Published at 4.00 pm on Tuesday 4 December 2012

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): In the current economic climate it's harder than ever to get a bank loan or funding to invest in business development or business growth. Businesses are faced with lower levels of grant availability and more stringent lending regimes. The combination of this means it is often harder for them to finance growth.

Alternative sources of finance, such as micro-financing, debt finance, venture capital, technology transfer and business angel funding, have not been widely available in Northern Ireland.

Against this background it is clear that financial instruments, such as venture capital and debt financing, need to be made available to support local businesses. This will help to rebalance and rebuild our economy and to drive private sector growth.

Invest Northern Ireland has put in place a £100m Access to Finance Initiative to ensure that companies with high growth potential are not held back because they cannot access finance. Through the suite of funds Invest NI will be able to offer a continuum of funding for business seeking between £1k and £2m.

When fully implemented, the Access to Finance initiative will have five separate funds totalling more than £100m. This suite of support will ensure that SMEs and all spectrums of the development cycle have access to financial support through a range of equity investment and debt financed models.

As part of Invest NI's Access to Finance Strategy, two separate loan funds have been developed.

Growth Loan Fund

The £50million Growth Loan Fund was launched in June 2012, following the appointment of Whiterock Capital Partners to manage the Fund. The appointment was made after a CPD managed tender process.

The Growth Loan Fund expects to provide loan finance of approximately £10m per annum to SMEs based in Northern Ireland for the next 5 years. Individual Loans will typically be between £50k and £500k and, subject to the amount and quality of deal flow, the Fund anticipates making approximately 50 loans per annum.

Since its launch, Whiterock Capital has been building its team and developing a pipeline. More than 140 businesses have enquired about the availability of funding and two loans have been made with eight other loans approved by the Fund's investment committee.

Demand for loans is strong and targets for the remainder of the PfG period should be achieved. Invest NI will monitor demand closely and stands ready to increase the scale of funding in this area if so needed.

Small Business Loan Fund

The Small Business Loan Fund is a £5million debt financing initiative that will provide loans from £1,000 to £50,000 for small and micro businesses. Ulster Community Investment Trust (UCIT) has been appointed to manage this Fund following a CPD managed tender process. The Fund will be launched as soon as all regulatory matters, including FSA approval are in place.



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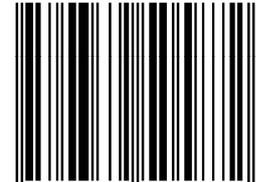
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