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Contents

Assembly Business

Statutory Committee Membership287
Public Petition: Drumcree College287

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Consideration Stage288
Social Security (Loss of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011.....289

Private Members' Business

Emergency Life Support Skills297
Welfare Reform310

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure314
Education319

Private Members' Business

Welfare Reform (*continued*)326

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 20 February 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Statutory Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: As with similar motions, this will be treated as a business motion, and, therefore, there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Ms Paula Bradley replace Mr Gregory Campbell as a member of the Committee for Social Development; and that Mr Gregory Campbell replace Ms Paula Bradley as a member of the Committee for the Environment. – [Mr Weir]

Public Petition: Drumcree College

Mr Speaker: Mrs Dolores Kelly has sought leave to present a public petition in accordance with Standing Order 22, and the Member will have up to three minutes to speak about it.

Mrs D Kelly: This morning, Members may have noticed that a group of parents, pupils and community representatives from Portadown arrived at the Assembly to launch a petition to save Drumcree College. The Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) informed the headmaster of the college just over a week ago, practically on the eve of mid-term recess, that the school is to close by June of this year.

The community, parents and teachers know that numbers have been falling, but not enough has been done to secure the future of Drumcree College. In the immediate Portadown area, on the Garvaghy Road, there are two primary schools: Ballyoran Primary School, which has an enrolment of 234 pupils, and St John the Baptist Primary School, which has 386. There are also St Mary's Primary School in Maghera, which has just over 80 pupils, and the Presentation Primary School, which has 140.

Between 2014 and 2015, it is anticipated that there will be an increase in the local population. It is most regrettable that CCMS has decided to close the school. Over recent years, CCMS and the Department of Education have allowed a situation to develop where pupils go to schools outside the catchment area and travel up to Armagh. Between six and eight buses travel outside the locality on any given weekday. That is not environmentally sustainable and goes against our aspiration of having local services available to local people.

Drumcree College also has an excellent learning support unit that is the envy of many. There is great anxiety among the pupils, the school staff and the teaching staff. Many Members will

appreciate the difficult years that the people of Drumcree lived through. The news that they will lose their local college has been a bitter blow. Therefore, I present a petition on their behalf. Last week, they launched a website that asks people to support saving the school. As of last night, it had received 1,289 hits.

I hope that the Education Committee and the Minister, who has yet to publish his viability audit, will look again at the needs of the population in Portadown and the totality of education provision. Surely, there has to be a wider debate about shared education and having better resources at local level instead of bussing our children out of our towns and villages.

Mrs D Kelly moved forward and laid the petition on the Table.

Mr Speaker: I will forward the petition to the Minister of Education and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee.

Executive Committee Business

Budget Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance and Personnel to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget Bill.

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

Mr Speaker: No amendments have been tabled. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the seven clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the four schedules and the long title.

Clauses 1 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 4 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

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

Social Security (Loss of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Social Security (Loss of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

The regulations have their basis in the Welfare Reform Act (Northern Ireland) 2010, which was laid before the Assembly on 29 July 2010. Before I outline what they will achieve, I thank the Business Committee for tabling the regulations and the Committee for Social Development for giving them consideration during its recent meetings. I know the matter generated some discussion, and I hope to address some of the issues raised.

The regulations provide for the reduction or withdrawal of benefit for four weeks from people who have sought to undermine our benefit system by committing fraud. This is not a new concept. The Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 provides for a 13-week loss of benefit where an individual has been convicted of benefit fraud for a second time within a five-year period. The latest regulations build on the current arrangements by applying the loss of benefit for a first offence, but they limit the period of disqualification to four weeks rather than 13 weeks, as applies for a second offence. Introducing the new four-week loss of benefit for a first offence also brings the Social Security Agency into line with the procedures adopted in Great Britain, and it ensures that those caught committing fraud, whether in Northern Ireland or Great Britain, are treated in exactly the same way.

The policy of parity ensures that a person in Northern Ireland has the same benefit entitlements as his or her counterparts in England, Scotland or Wales. That facilitates free movement within the United Kingdom and ensures that individuals have access to the same benefits, regardless of location and irrespective of whether Northern Ireland can itself generate sufficient revenue to fund the benefits. It is acknowledged that parity has served Northern Ireland well and that there are risks associated with moving away from parity provision in social security.

I understand that there may be concerns about the impact of the regulations. Their purpose, alongside the full range of penalties available,

is to deter those intent on committing fraud, and, without them, my Department would fail in its duty to safeguard public funds. However, I am acutely aware of the need to balance fraud prevention with ensuring that all members of society have adequate protection from hardship. That is why it is important to stress that the existing safeguards to prevent hardship under the current 13-week sanction will also apply to the new four-week provisions.

I will highlight those safeguards. First, many of the benefits currently available will not be subject to the four-week sanction at all. Those include statutory maternity, paternity and adoption pay, benefits paid to children, bereavement payments, retirement pension or benefits that cover the extra costs of disability. Of the benefits that qualify, the majority of those that are payable due to low income, such as state pension credit, income support, housing benefit and income-related employment and support allowance, are subject to reduction, not withdrawal.

The reduction will correspond to —

Mr F McCann: I will speak on this later, but I just wanted to say that, as a result of the reduction in benefits that people may get, others in the household will end up having to make a fresh claim. It could take three or four weeks for that to come through without any benefits being received.

Mr McCausland: If the Member is patient, he will get the information that he may seek.

The reduction — it is not a withdrawal — will correspond to 40% of the single person's allowance, which is currently £67.50, in the first instance. That is mitigated further to a 20% reduction in circumstances where the customer or other member of the family is seriously ill or pregnant.

The final important point to make is that, of the remaining benefits that may be withdrawn, such as jobseeker's allowance, contributory employment and support allowance and incapacity benefit, anyone is entitled to seek financial assistance through hardship rates. In a number of ways, therefore, any potential difficulties are mitigated.

12.15 pm

Going back to the core intention of introducing the regulations, I make it absolutely clear that

the powers are solely about dealing with fraud. This is not about penalising anyone who makes an honest mistake. Perhaps I should explain precisely what I mean by fraud. Benefit fraud requires the deliberate and intentional act of claiming money to which there is no entitlement. I would hope that everyone in the House would join me in saying that fraud is unacceptable. Common examples are those who work yet claim jobseeker's allowance for being out of work; those declaring limited means to meet the daily costs of living yet retaining large accumulations of savings; or those who claim assistance to meet the cost of living on their own yet have a partner living with them. Those three examples serve to show clearly that this is not something where you have an accidental or honest mistake. If someone is in work and is claiming jobseeker's allowance, they know that they are in work. If they have money in the bank, they will know it. If they are living with someone else, yet claiming to live on their own, they will know it. Those are not cases of an honest mistake. Without firm and visible deterrent action and measures such as the regulations before the House today, those intent on committing fraud would continue to make false claims.

I also take the opportunity to highlight the significant progress made by the agency over recent years, with fraud well down from over £60 million in 2002 to £20 million in 2010. There has been a reduction, which is welcome, but there is more work to be done. However, within the context of that progress, I cannot and will not be complacent. I seek to introduce the regulations to ensure that people are deterred from criminal behaviour. Without that deterrence and without the efforts my Department puts into tackling fraud, the benefit system, which is vital to the 99.9% of customers who are honest and rightfully in receipt of much needed help, would be completely undermined.

This is not about mistakes. Although I have stressed precisely what I mean by fraud, I add further clarity: fraud means that this is not about mistakes. I understand entirely the concerns raised at the time the regulations were launched in September that innocent people might face a sanction for having misunderstood or made a mistake. Let me address that point clearly and absolutely: only those who accept an administrative penalty or admit to having committed fraud or those who are found guilty by a court of having committed fraud will face

a fraud sanction. Those who have made a genuine mistake have nothing to fear from the regulations. I stress again that there is a clear distinction to be made: only those who deliberately make false claims to benefit will ever have any cause to be concerned over these or any other of the available fraud sanctions.

The existing loss of benefit provision impacts only on the small number of people who commit benefit fraud twice and are convicted of the offence in court. It has no impact on the larger number of people who commit benefit fraud once or on those who have committed fraud but are dealt with outside the court process. This four-week benefit sanction applies to all those who receive administrative penalties and formal cautions as well as those who are convicted of benefit fraud through the courts.

Although there is the potential for around 1,000 cases a year to be affected, it is again important to place that in context. The agency has over 650,000 benefit customers, of whom around 1,000 are sanctioned for fraud each year. That represents just 0.2% of the agency's customer base. The other key message is, of course, that ultimately my goal is that no one commits fraud. Through the measure today, alongside our existing range of sanctions, the aim is to deter people from committing fraud rather than to catch them.

We must remember that benefit fraud is theft of taxpayers' money, and so there has never been a more important time to ensure that there are effective sanctions in place to deter and deal with those who choose to deliberately abuse the benefits system. I believe that the new sanction will strengthen the measures that we have in place already and provide a further, much more effective, deterrent to people who are considering abusing the system that is there to support those in need.

I reiterate the key safeguard: any person who believes that they are not guilty of having committed fraud is entitled to all the defences and protections afforded by the criminal justice system. As with any case in which criminality is suspected, it is, ultimately, for the court to decide guilt where wrongdoing is suspected, not for my Department. In the event of guilt having been decided and if the benefit involved is subject to the regulations, the courts will, of course, be free to take into account in

sentencing the fact that a person found guilty will face loss of benefit.

I believe that it is important that we get the balance right between protecting wider society from the fraudulent and wasteful use of taxpayers' money and ensuring that those who are subject to sanction do not, at the same time, face undue hardship. I believe that the regulations strike the right balance. They are there to protect society. However, ultimately, I have no desire to see the regulations needing to be applied to any customer. The aim is simple: to deter criminality, to remove the temptation to commit fraud and, in doing so, to ensure that the benefits system maintains its integrity and security and serves those who are rightfully entitled to assistance.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I do not intend to say that much about this because some of my party colleagues will refer to the motion in more detail. I thank the Minister for tabling the motion and speaking to it. I will make a number of points on behalf of the Committee.

The Committee voted in support of the motion from the Minister and the Department, but I would like to set that in some context. My party, myself included, voted against the provisions. I want to place it on record in the House that the Committee took quite a long time — a number of months — to deliberate on the amendment to the regulations. Primarily, that was on the simple principle of the injustice of the amendment to the existing regulations. Quite simply, it was the view of all members of the Committee that this represents double jeopardy. As all members have the right to do, some took the view that this is primarily a parity issue and, therefore, could not vote against it.

All members of the Committee were resolute in their support for the Department's efforts to root out any fraud in the benefits system. That goes without saying, but I repeat it this morning on behalf of all members of the Committee.

I just want to set the record straight that the Committee's deliberation on this took a number of meetings. We left the issue to one side while other matters were discussed in the House, not least Housing Executive accommodation and the housing benefit cost. The Committee then returned to the issue, with, I have to say, great difficulty. Even the members who voted for the

amendment were quite firm in feeling that this is an unjust amendment to the regulations. If a person in receipt of benefit is found guilty of that fraud, they will have to pay the money back. That is as it should be, but they will then face prosecution. Therein lies the lack of justice. Unlike someone who commits another crime, they will have their benefits impacted upon. To most people, that seems inherently unfair. It is only if you are in receipt of benefit and commit the crime of fraud that you have a sanction imposed on you by the courts and then have further sanctions imposed. Even in the circumstances prescribed by the Minister, further sanctions will be imposed. My party colleagues felt, as did all other Committee members, that that was grossly unfair.

I will now depart, Mr Speaker, from speaking as Chairperson of the Committee and speak as a party representative about the intention of the amendment. My view and that of my party colleagues is that people may have been overpaid in error by departmental officials. It must be stated that the Department's own figures, not mine, show that, when it comes to spend, fraud is infinitesimal when compared with departmental error.

The Department could overpay a claimant for a period and then discover the overpayment. The claimant would be called in and asked whether he or she received that payment in the wrong. Often, when such a payment is drawn to a claimant's attention, it is routinely shown to have been a simple oversight. Often, the claimant will accept that they received the payment in the wrong and they must repay the money overpaid. That leads them into the grey area of prosecution where they could also face the courts. Despite the fact that the level of departmental error is grossly greater than that of fraud, no official will face sanctions for putting someone in that situation, someone who is at subsistence level already by virtue of the very fact that they are in receipt of benefits of whatever description. No official will face any sanction whatever. My party believes that this is a matter of simple, basic unfairness.

The nub of the issue is to stop fraud and save the Department money. That is as it should be. However, there are tactical matters to be considered. If it is drawn to a claimant's attention that they have been overpaid, that person will not readily accept that that is the case and repay the money, if in doing so he

or she will also face the courts. The claimant will say, "Sorry, just take me to court". Then, the Department's difficulty will be to mount a successful prosecution. In many cases, that will be almost impossible because the courts will take a view on the merits of each individual case. The prosecution service will have to work out whether it is worthwhile to take each case to court. Therefore, this amendment will not necessarily be successful in trying to save the Department money.

As I said, my party believes that this is a matter of the basic principle of justice. Mickey Brady and colleagues will speak further on that. It is double jeopardy. If a person falls foul of that or even commits fraud, they should either pay the money back through the benefits system or face the courts. It really should not be both. When anyone else commits any other type of crime, they do not face double jeopardy.

Mr Campbell: The Chair of the Committee for Social Development outlined the issue on which the Committee dwelt at considerable length. I think that everybody in the Committee can see the difficulties that are enshrined in the regulations. I want to say a few words and come to the nub of the issue briefly. Even though I know that the debate is open-ended, I do not plan to speak open-endedly.

In his opening remarks, the Minister made the pertinent point that just 10 years ago fraud cost the Department — that means you and I, Mr Speaker, and every taxpayer in the country — £60 million each year. Over a 10-year period, that would be over half a billion pounds on fraud. However, that figure has been coming down gradually, which is right and proper. It is now approximately £20 million. That is still an excessive amount, and everyone supports the crackdown on fraud.

I also welcome the Minister's assurances on errors and mistakes by claimants. It is important that claimants who complete forms, either in conjunction with those who give them assistance or on their own, understand that mistakes can and do occur and that they will not be penalised and prosecuted if they make an honest mistake. That is good. However, the points are relevant with regard to people who are in receipt of benefit. We all know that, whether people regard benefits as being generous or less than generous, if they are easily accessible and are regarded by some as being better than not

having them, there will be fraud. The problem is how we deal with that fraud.

12.30 pm

The nub of the issue is parity; that is at the bottom of this. We can all discuss the problems that individuals will be faced with and analyse and discuss individual cases night and day. However, the bottom line — I hope that the Minister will refer to this at the end of the debate — is what the cost would be to this community and to Northern Ireland taxpayers if we were to break from parity. Some might ask what the benefit of parity is: it is £8,000 million per annum. Unfortunately, we face this problem on many occasions when dealing with welfare benefit reform. We must ask what the cost will be to our community if we were to decide, for whatever reason, to depart from parity to try to protect those affected, be they numerous or quite small in number or affected by a small or large amount. That is the unfortunate catch-22 situation that we are in. We must grasp that and decide how much we would need to find, from whatever Department or resource, to make up for that breach of parity. We must also understand who will suffer as a result. That is the catch-22 question that we never hear answered. Unfortunately, many of us will have to cast our vote on that basis today.

Mr Copeland: I speak as my party's spokesman from the Committee for Social Development. I echo the words of Mr Campbell and recognise the warnings that he gave.

The word "fraud" is generally used in conjunction with the word "error" and an examination of the two throws up a curious statistic, which is that the cost of departmental and customer error exceeds the cost of fraud. Although I fully support and agree with the notion that fraud must be prevented, detected and penalised, I do not think that that alone is an adequate approach to the problem before us.

No one is against the Department's efforts to tackle benefit fraud. It is a despicable crime, because it takes advantage of a system that was designed to protect the vulnerable, the needy, the disabled and the elderly, and it diverts funds from those who truly need them. However, it is fair to say and recognise that the proposals gave rise to and promoted a good deal of discussion in the Committee. It is quite right that that was the case, because it is the

Committee's job to scrutinise legislation before it comes to the House.

The concerns of the Committee, such as they were, centred on several particular areas. One of those was double jeopardy and the notion that claimants could be prosecuted twice. That seems wrong. They could be prosecuted by the courts, which could result in a fine and by the Department in the form of benefit sanctions. Some could be forgiven for saying that that is not quite fair. Secondly, claimants found not guilty of benefit fraud in court could still face benefit sanctions, because the three tests applied by the Public Prosecution Service differ from those applied by the Department. That could give rise to people being adjudicated as guilty by one system and not guilty by another. We also have the impact of the decisions when they are made and against whom they are made, particularly, as is envisaged, if the individual concerned is the head of a household. Delays in benefit payments that may arise from new and fresh claims being submitted could result in a disproportionate level of disadvantage and need being foisted on innocent parties.

However, as Mr Campbell said, all of that pales into insignificance when compared with any action that could be construed as a breach of parity. A person in Northern Ireland is subject to the same rules and conditions of entitlement as a person in Great Britain. According to the Minister, the Department for Work and Pensions and Mr Campbell — I have no reason to doubt any of those opinions — a move away from parity could be seen as a breach of parity and that would be irresponsible.

Mr Durkan: I agree that fraud is unacceptable, as will, I am sure, or I certainly hope, all Members who speak. As Mr Copeland outlined, it is far from a victimless crime. However, we must also be aware of just how minor a problem benefit fraud is in Northern Ireland in the greater scheme of things. Less than 0.4% of benefit expenditure is lost to fraud. We do not want to create a sledgehammer with which to crack that nut. We cannot support the creation of a double penalty for people, regardless of how we view their offence.

As mentioned by Members who spoke previously, this penalty can, despite the Minister's reassurances, cause undue and unfair hardship to families, not just individuals. We would rather see the coalition Government in London display

the same zeal in attempts to maximise benefit uptake, for example, or, indeed, to eradicate departmental error, which other Members have mentioned.

This legislation does not merely deter or punish fraud. It also serves to demonise other benefit claimants in the eyes of others, creating the impression that fraud is much more prevalent than it actually is. With the successful and significant reduction in fraud over recent years, as Mr Campbell told us, one wonders whether there is any point or need for this new legislation. The focus of the coalition Government on targeting those on benefits rather than individuals and companies that continue to evade tax says much about their priorities. Those are not priorities we share.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the proposed regulations. First, I want to say that loss of benefit regulations are already in place. The Social Security (Loss of Benefit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2002 and the Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 allow for benefits to be withdrawn or reduced for 13 weeks where a person is convicted of benefit fraud twice and the second offence was committed within five years of the date of the previous conviction.

It is interesting to note that the existing policy impacts on only a very small number of people. The 13 claimants who were convicted in 2010-11 were all repeat offenders who had been convicted of a benefit offence more than once within five years. The new regulations will include those who have been convicted of benefit fraud for the first time. The introduction of benefit sanctions such as that will reinforce the message that abuse of the system will not be tolerated, and the small number of people who wilfully commit fraud will lose their right to receive the same level of support as the vast majority of those who do not abuse the system, and I agree with that principle.

As far as I am aware, certain groups have been protected under the sanctions, and the Minister has already highlighted some of them. The penalty will not affect bereavement payments, retirement pensions, payments made for children or those that cover the extra costs of disability. Despite those reassurances, members of the Committee raised concerns about the potential impact of the changes, and we spent many weeks deliberating on them. However, as has

already been said, the impact of a breach of parity must be considered seriously.

Generally, Northern Ireland has benefited from parity, as all rates of benefit and entitlement here are on a par with anyone in the same position in England, Scotland or Wales, irrespective of whether Northern Ireland can generate sufficient revenue to fund the benefits that are distributed here. As with other parts of the UK, funding for social security benefits in Northern Ireland is in line with the entitlement of claimants here. That money is provided separately, outside the block grant, and is predicated on parity being maintained. Any costs arising, were we to breach parity, would have to be made up from the block grant by the Executive.

As a result, it is crucial that we remember that any break in parity could have significant financial implications and trigger a review of the current advantageous funding arrangements that we have. Therefore, I support the regulations.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. A lot of the arguments have been rehearsed already, but there is a fundamental issue here. Everyone should be equal under the law, but it is clear that people who are convicted of social security fraud are not equal because they are also sanctioned. Members have talked about a double whammy. In fact, if you look at it logically, you will see that it is probably a treble whammy. You are convicted, you may be incarcerated or fined, and then you lose your benefits. How are you supposed to pay your fine? If you cannot pay your fine, you will be in further trouble. It works like that.

In relation to what Mr Durkan and Mr Copeland said, it needs to be borne in mind that sanctions are not victimless either. I say at the outset that we do not condone benefit fraud. I worked in an advice centre for 30 years, and benefit fraud happened. I do not necessarily agree that the sanctions will act as a deterrent to people who commit benefit fraud. Certain individuals think that they will never get caught. Therefore, I am not sure about the efficacy of the sanctions. What they will do is affect families. The Minister talks about hardship payments. However, those are limited and at the discretion of the local office and, in many cases, decision-makers who are not that discretionary. That is also an issue that needs to be addressed.

There are many issues around benefit fraud and sanctions, but it is unfair how people will be affected. Individuals who go out and commit benefit fraud do it knowingly and take a calculated risk about whether they will be caught, but their families do not. In many cases that I have come across over the years, the families were simply not aware of what was happening and did not benefit from the extra money that was received. That also needs to be borne in mind. Mr Campbell talked about parity and catch-22. I always find that people who use that cliché do not want to go into the detail and explain exactly what it means. Parity is a different issue that needs to be discussed in greater detail. In this case, we are talking about inequality in the law.

As much effort should be put into ensuring that people get the benefit to which they are entitled. Pension credit, for example, is under-claimed by approximately £1.9 million per week. That money does not go back into the economy here; it goes back to the British Treasury. The same effort should be put into ensuring that people get the money that they are entitled to. I accept that there are people who will always commit benefit fraud. They should not. It is wrong, and it should not be condoned. Those people deserve to be punished, not the other people who are victims of the fraud carried out by the family member or whoever. That needs to be remembered.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I had written something out, but my two colleagues have said everything that I was going to say. It is always difficult to speak last. We have been fairly consistent in the House in arguing against sanctions. About 18 months ago, we brought amendments to another aspect of the sanctions in the Bill. We did that because we believe that it is wrong to charge and sentence people twice for the same crime.

As my colleagues and everybody else have said, fraud is wrong. Every day, the Department for Social Development's (DSD) website contains evidence of people who have been brought in front of the courts and sentenced for doing the double, as it is called. They may then go on to be sanctioned. The vast majority of those who are caught doing the double are women on low pay, often in cleaning jobs. They are caught either because someone lifts the phone on them or because the DSD goes into cleaning firms every number of months, clears out their

files and brings charges. The injustice is not only that people will be sanctioned twice but that, the next day, the employers will have people working on the same jobs without any fear of prosecution or sanction. They do not fear being charged because there is nothing there to do it, which is a big injustice.

The fact is that people who do the double and are then arrested sometimes have to pay back considerable amounts of money. Some have to go to prison, although that is fairly rare. However, when they get out, they will face another sanction.

12.45 pm

I know what the Minister is saying. He is saying that there are built-in provisions that will allow people to overcome the loss of benefit, be it through a crisis loan or another benefit. However, under such circumstances, it is not that easy to go into a social security office and get a crisis loan request dealt with. By and large, people will have to make fresh claims, which could take weeks to process; so, the family of the person doing the double will be penalised along with that person. However, people who get a number of years in jail for a serious offence can walk into a benefits office upon their release, explain that they are only out of prison and say that they want to make a fresh claim. They face no obstacle in doing that, and that is the injustice.

Most people who do the double, and I am not saying that that is right, do so as a consequence of their financial circumstances at the time. Members need to take on board the type of people we are dealing with: it is usually those who are finding it difficult to live on subsistence level benefits. I think that sanctions are wrong and that this process will condemn people to being sentenced twice. Therefore, I therefore ask Members to vote against the regulations.

Mr McCausland: Members made quite a number of points, and I thank them for their contributions to the discussion on the regulations. I will pick up on those points, although not in the order in which they were raised because some of them were touched on by a number of different Members.

One of the points was that there is too much focus on fraud and not enough on error. I recognise that fraud is not the only contributor to incorrect benefit. Staff accuracy continues to be placed under significant scrutiny.

However, the fact is that the overall level of financial accuracy across the benefits system is 99.2%. We recognise, therefore, that staff error accounts for only 0.8% of expenditure. A close watch is kept on fraud and error. The Social Security Agency operates significant governance and control procedures to drive up staff performance. That has been successful in that staff error has fallen from more than 2% in 2002-03 to 0.8% in 2010. So, there is ongoing and successful work in driving down error. Alongside that, we need ongoing work to drive down fraud. I think that it was Alex Maskey who suggested that there was some great disparity between error and fraud. In fact, the figures are as follows: error 0.8%; and fraud 0.5%. In other words, fraud is a clear and substantial issue. A lot has been done to reduce that very significantly, but more needs to be done.

Gregory Campbell pointed out that there would be parity implications if the regulations do not proceed. I think that it was Mickey Brady who said that we need to look more at the issue of parity, discuss what it means and so on. The fact is that it is clear what it means. It ensures that a person in Northern Ireland has the same benefit entitlements and rates of benefit as his or her counterparts in other parts of the United Kingdom, be it in England, Scotland or Wales. That has many benefits for people in Northern Ireland. I just do not understand the issue as regards analysing that.

It seems to me to be clear that it is a straightforward issue. However, the Member wants to explore it, and I am sure that it will be explored on other occasions. It is not, however, something —

Mr Brady: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: Yes.

Mr Brady: Parity is not all about money. Other aspects of parity need to be discussed, including administration and all sorts of other issues that are involved in parity.

Mr McCausland: A variety of issues relate to parity, including legislation, regulations and operations, but the basic principle is very clear to us.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for giving way. As I said in my speech, the important issue of parity keeps coming up. In Committee, the vote was carried by only five votes to four, so if one member had voted the other way, we could have

been talking not only about the possibility of the costs of parity but about the reality of it. If that had been the case or were to be the case in the future, can the Minister outline whether, if the Department for Work and Pensions were to determine that to be a breach of parity that would come to £100 million, £200 million or whatever cost, he, the Executive and all of us would be obliged to find the shortfall?

Mr McCausland: I thank the Member for his intervention, and he has made the implications of breaking parity absolutely clear. It is a luxury that Northern Ireland cannot afford.

I picked up on Mark Durkan's use of the words "undue and unfair". A sanctions system is already in place, and I ask him to reflect on whether that system is undue and unfair. The logic of his position is that he would throw out all sanctions, even the current sanction, which has been successful as a measure in driving down the level of fraud. He also spoke about demonising other people. No one is demonised. If people carry out criminal offences — fraud is a criminal offence — it is right and proper that those individuals should be sanctioned for so doing. I urge him to reflect on the implications of what he has said, and I make that point more widely, because a lot of comments were made during the discussion, and if Members read the Hansard report of the debate and reflect on what they have said, they might realise that they open up some very dangerous grounds by the direction in which they were going.

Mickey Brady said that sanctions are not victimless and that sanctions do not work. Sanctions do work. When you look at the number of people who are identified as carrying out a first offence and the number who are identified as carrying out a second offence, you will see quite clearly that there is a substantial reduction. The two strikes policy impacts on only a very small number of claimants. During 2010-11, it impacted on 13 people, whereas a much larger number of people carried out a first offence. That brings me on to the question of numbers. In 2010-11, 1,128 sanctions were imposed. By the time of the second strike, the number reduced to 13. That shows clearly that, when people see the potential to lose their benefit for 13 weeks, it brings a bit of reality and recognition to the situation. Although, potentially, every one of the 1,128 people could have attracted the loss of benefit provisions, only those who remain in receipt of a sanctionable benefit or reclaim within the disqualification period will be

sanctioned. The issue of numbers is important to set the scale of the problem, and if we could get to the point at which 1,000 fewer people were committing fraud, we would be in a better place than we are now.

The issue has been set out very clearly. We have been through a wide range of issues. I did not really hear that many arguments of substance. The difficulty for some people is a mindset that means that they cannot quite bring themselves to the position of supporting this.

However, it is important for this Assembly and this country that we get to the right place, because, as Gregory Campbell pointed out and as we discussed, there are significant implications if we do not go down this road. If people want to burden the Northern Ireland exchequer with whatever number of millions of pounds it is, so be it. However, will we take that out of health or out of education? That is the implication of going down the road of not following parity with the regulations. Therefore, I urge the House to view the regulations as a vital part of the measures that are needed to help deter anyone who is intent on undermining the benefits system, which is vital to the needs and well-being of so many in our society.

I just noticed that I did not respond to the point about there being too much focus on fraud and not enough on benefit uptake. We are doing much more this year than ever before and more than was done under any previous Minister to encourage benefit uptake, with television campaigns, an outreach programme, the innovation fund and targeted exercises aimed at individual groups of people. The benefit uptake programme, which has been in place since 2005, has been strengthened this year, and, so far, it has resulted in over £37 million in additional benefits and arrears being paid to customers across Northern Ireland. We are dealing with error, uptake and fraud, and we are bound by the principle of parity. I urge Members to consider carefully the implications of what they have said, to reflect on it and to act in a responsible way by supporting the regulations. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Social Security (Loss of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 be approved.

Private Members' Business

Emergency Life Support Skills

Mr Speaker: The next item of business is a cross-party motion on emergency life support skills. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Weir: I beg to move

That this Assembly is concerned that heart and circulatory disease remains Northern Ireland's biggest killer; notes that, for every minute that passes after a cardiac arrest without defibrillation, the chance of survival is reduced by around 10% but that immediate cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) can improve the chances of survival by up to a factor of three; further notes that, last year, more than 30,000 people were trained in emergency life support skills (ELS), including CPR, by the British Heart Foundation's (BHF) Heartstart programme; supports BHF's campaign to ensure that all schools, communities, and workplaces, provide ELS training; and calls on the Executive, the health and social care trusts and the education bodies to work together to provide the necessary investment to deliver this training to every school, community and workplace.

I welcome the opportunity to move the motion. As you indicated, Mr Speaker, this is a cross-party motion that bears the names of all five of the major parties. That shows the unity of purpose on the issue. Today is an opportunity to highlight the issue, provide a degree of education for people and, hopefully, see some action. If you look at the motion, you will see that it is not simply a challenge to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), although I understand that the Minister will respond to the debate. It is not even simply a challenge to the whole Executive but is, indeed, a wider challenge to society as a whole, including schools, workplaces, community and voluntary groups and to all of us as individuals.

I want to highlight the significance of the motion. At the outset, I thank all those parties that have backed the motion here and in the Business Committee. A number of parties were willing to move motions further down the slot and take a later time for them to facilitate today's debate.

It is also a motion with a tone that resonates throughout various parts of the British Isles. It is something that is being debated at Westminster and is to be debated in other devolved institutions. It is something that has been pushed by the British Heart Foundation and by the Irish Heart Foundation in the Irish Republic.

1.00 pm

Emergency life skills, as I will explain later, go beyond CPR and keeping those who have heart attacks alive. There are other considerations to be borne in mind. However, it is undoubtedly the case that the main focus has been on those suffering heart attacks. It is important at the start of the debate to acknowledge that, over the years, a considerable amount of work has been done that has benefited people with heart disease or who have had heart attacks. Consequently, anybody looking at the level of mortality rates will see that, for example, nearly 5,000 people died of heart disease in 1980, and that we have got that number down to a little bit over 2,000. It has more than halved in 30 years, which is to be welcomed. However, it is also undoubtedly the case that there is more to be done.

There are many statistics around the impact of heart disease, and I suspect that the debate may be awash with statistics. More than 60,000 people in Northern Ireland have had a heart attack at some stage. I think there are 97,000 who are acknowledged to have some form of angina and, indeed, there are probably many with undiagnosed problems. I suspect that, despite the fall in the statistics — we should also remember that we are dealing with the second biggest killer in Northern Ireland, second only to cancer — it is something that is of resonance to virtually every family in Northern Ireland. I suspect that there is no one in the Chamber who does not have either a relative or friend who has suffered through angina or has suffered a heart attack. I suspect that there are some in the Chamber who have lost a loved one to a heart attack. While there are a number of ways in which we can tackle the problems of heart attacks — I will be coming on to those — the key element of the focus is on making that difference by way of early intervention.

Clearly, swift action can be taken within hospitals for those who suffer heart attacks, but we have to acknowledge that all the statistics suggest that the vast majority of heart attacks

happen outside of hospitals. According to research, in Northern Ireland, about 84% of heart attacks happen in the home, 9% happen in a public place and about another 8% happen in care institutions. The bottom line is that, without CPR, for every minute following sudden cardiac arrest, unless there is intervention, the chance of survival reduces by around 7% to 10% per minute. Overall, bystander CPR increases survival rate by two to three times compared with no bystander CPR. It is undoubtedly the case that that early intervention is crucial. Indeed, it forms a vital link of what the British Heart Foundation has called the chain of survival. That has four elements to it: early recognition and call for help; early CPR; early defibrillation; and post-resuscitation care.

It is also the case that the other factor that can reduce the number of deaths from heart attacks is preventing them happening in the first place. I know that the Minister has been very proactive on that front. There is a wider challenge to society around lifestyle choices and prevention. In looking at that chain of survival, it is clear that there is work that needs to be done on a range of those elements. For example, in terms of early recognition, a survey was carried out in the north Down and Ards area that indicated that 30% of heart patients failed to call 999 and that about 30% of those with heart attack-like symptoms waited for more than 12 hours before calling for help. It also revealed that just 19% of people admitted to the coronary care unit with chest pain had called 999. Therefore, work needs to be done around that.

Northern Ireland has been at the very centre of the issue around early defibrillation for many years, which is one of the reasons why it is particularly important that we are debating it in Northern Ireland. I am sure that the Minister will know, as the gentleman came from his constituency, that Northern Ireland made a vital contribution to defibrillation, particularly through the late Professor Frank Pantridge, who invented the mobile defibrillator.

There is ongoing work on post-resuscitation care to ensure that people are brought to the right hospital and that they receive the right treatment when they are there. The focus is on the early use of CPR to buy time; that is where the focus needs to lie and is where the campaign has been largely focused.

The British Heart Foundation has done good work: last year, 30,000 people were trained in emergency life support skills. Although we have focused on CPR, emergency life support skills are also about knowledge of first aid in how to assess an unconscious patient, deal with choking and with serious bleeding. There are many examples of intervention by a trained person saving a life, but there is much more to be done.

Despite ongoing training, St John's Ambulance estimates that about 150,000 people die unnecessarily each year across the UK when there could have been early intervention by way of first aid. That is where we have a part to play. As indicated, around 30,000 people were trained in emergency life support skills last year, and, overall, about 160,000 people have been trained in the last number of years. However, we can go further.

It is not simply a matter of what action the Health Department takes and what action is taken by the Executive as a whole; we have to look at a range of issues. For example, although some health trusts have embraced the idea, support for emergency life skills has not been uniform throughout Northern Ireland. We need to tackle that.

Similarly, much of the focus of training should be on the young and those in school. A number of schools have embraced the early life skills programme, and some of the written answers that I have received to questions indicate that there is room in the curriculum for that; but it has not been taken up by every school. Although work can be done at a central level, there is a major challenge in schools in particular, but also in workplaces and voluntary organisations, to embrace emergency life support skills. The opportunity is there to be taken.

For those of us who have seen a loved one suffer a heart attack and not known what to do or, in the most painful situation, lost a loved one to a heart attack, the Assembly must give a clear message that that knowledge must be spread. I would like to see an initiative not in the motion: if all 108 MLAs were trained, we could set a very good example to society.

I hope that the whole House can embrace the motion, as it is literally a matter of life and death. Let us work hard to improve survival rates that affect the cost of our healthcare, because treating those who have suffered a

heart attack creates a great deal of financial strain on the system, but also that we can see more people —

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

Mr Weir: We can reduce further the mortality rate by embracing this, and we can make a positive contribution to people's lives and families across Northern Ireland.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I would like to record apologies from Michelle Gildernew for not being here; as people are aware, she has broken her foot. She is a signatory to the motion, which Sinn Féin supports.

The problem with all-party motions is that everybody will say the same thing.

Mr McCarthy: It is the way you say it.

Ms S Ramsey: I do not think that there will be any debate as such; however, that should not take away from the fact that this is a very important issue. I am keen to hear what the Minister says because I know that he has an interest in it. I welcome Peter Weir's opening comments about preventative measures; they are important as well.

Mickey and I were just talking. We are supposed to be political leaders — supposed to be — but how many people in this Chamber know life-saving skills or CPR? We need to ensure that we are showing that political leadership in our communities. I know that some people in this Building are trained in first aid, and I give credit where credit is due, but, God forbid, if somebody were to suffer the symptoms of a heart attack, I could not help them. I think that I know everything, but I do not, and CPR is one of those things that I do not know. So it is important that we show that political leadership.

We talk about the Health Service and the invest-to-save strategy in a political context. This is a crucial invest-to-save issue. We need to ensure that we are in there at ground level in whatever community. We need to talk about preventative measures, and we need to ensure that people have the proper training. If we do that, we will save money further down the line, but, most importantly, we will save people. We will save our fathers, our brothers, our mothers, our sisters and our community representatives. That is the important thing about investing to save.

In opening the debate, Peter Weir went through a lot of statistics. When we talk about ensuring that we have life-saving skills and the relevant machinery in our communities, it is important that we look at the rural aspect of that. Having a lot of that information in urban settings is very good, but we need to look at how it fits in with some of our communities that are situated in isolated areas.

We are well aware that heart disease is probably the biggest killer, if you take into account the other diseases associated with it. Statistics show that the majority of deaths from heart disease take place in socially disadvantaged areas, so we need to get in there.

Following recent high-profile deaths over the last number of years, the community and voluntary sector and sporting organisations have worked to ensure that defibrillators are available, so I give credit where credit is due. However, we need to look at the chances of survival around having CPR training. Peter said that the chances of survival following cardiac arrest are reduced by 7% to 10% for every minute that people are without CPR. That is important, and the Heartstart programme is an effective and cost-effective way to ensure that we build all those resources in our community.

If 1,000 teachers are trained, it will have an impact on the pupils who they are in daily contact with, and it can generate momentum in our communities. Young people have been involved in some of the best campaigns, and they constantly chirp away about it when they go home. For instance, a lot of the anti-smoking campaigns gathered momentum because young people were taught about it in school, and they went home and constantly chirped and nagged, and that had a big impact on family life. So it is important that they take ownership of a lot of these campaigns.

We support the motion. It is an all-party motion, and nobody in this House could oppose it. That shows the collective responsibility that we have when we put our heads together and work together as political parties.

Mr Nesbitt: I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on this matter. It is an issue that is receiving unanimous support. Emergency life support skills should definitely be taught to all young people across Northern Ireland. It would equip them with the vital yet

straightforward skills that are necessary to keep people alive.

Mr Speaker, 12 years ago, I went with three friends for a weekend break to the south of Spain, and it is a matter of huge regret for the rest of my life that only three of us came back alive. Leonard died in an incident that was never properly explained. It may have been a heart attack or some other cause, but he was discovered struggling in the port of Puerto Banus. He would most certainly have drowned if somebody with life skills had not presented and volunteered to try to rescue him.

They did their best. They were able to get him, still alive, to hospital, but, unfortunately, he passed on within 24 hours. I wish to put on record my gratitude to the man who got him out of the water, because, although we were in Spain, the man happened to be from Bangor in County Down. I do not know how many Members have experience of the impact of life-saving skills or the devastating impact of the lack of them, but I, for one, have had that experience, and I am more than happy to support the motion on the back of that.

1.15 pm

I remember being taught some basic skills at school. As it was an all boys' school, there was much interest in how we would manage the mouth-to-mouth class. However, we managed to achieve it without any interpersonal contact, or, at least, as far as I could see. I wonder whether Mr Weir has any thoughts on how the 108 MLAs might circumnavigate that issue.

This sort of life skill is perfect for the classroom and for the revised curriculum.

Mr Weir: As somebody who has done first-aid training, I can say that the key element of CPR is, as indicated by the advert, less the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and more restarting the heart. At present, that is highlighted by Vinnie Jones. I am sure that we could manage to avoid all 108 Members having mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, certainly with each other. That would certainly be a step forward.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention and the reassurance contained therein.

The vast majority of heart attacks occur outside hospital. If we are to find a way to further improve survival rates, the people of Northern

Ireland must at least be aware of how to carry out CPR. No one particularly likes the thought of young people having to be taught how to physically position a person after he or she have collapsed. However, in many situations, doing something as simple as putting the body into the recovery position can have life-changing consequences.

I mentioned that life skills are perfect for the revised curriculum. I understand that the British Heart Foundation claims that around half of Northern Ireland's schools have had the emergency life support training, but the cost comes in at around £1,000 to £2,000 for each of those 537 schools. Four employees of the foundation have been providing training in the northern and western areas since 2008, but they are no longer in the position to keep that full funding in place. It is a matter of regret that they will end the programme in six weeks' time. The trainer from the British Heart Foundation normally tutors three or more teachers in each school and provides them with a training pack, containing a mannequin and all the other necessary resources, for about 40 pupils.

The revised curriculum allows areas for operation with regard to emergency life support skills. At primary level, I believe that the area would be personal development and mutual understanding, and, at post-primary level, it would be learning for life and work. The learning for life and work section of the revised curriculum originally stated that pupils would have to demonstrate their awareness of those skills. However, that was amended so that they were required to have only an awareness. Therefore they are required to have an awareness, rather than to be able to demonstrate that awareness. I question whether that comes back to budgetary constraints, which prevented —

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute, if he needs it.

Mr Nesbitt: I understand. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Given the enormity of the task and the fact that we are talking about saving lives, I wonder whether we could look at the revised curriculum and decide whether have "an awareness" of those skills is sufficient, or whether we should reinstate the word "demonstrate".

Training can be delivered as part of the curriculum by adequately trained teachers.

Michael McGimpsey's 'Service Framework for Cardiovascular Health and Wellbeing' has already laid the foundation for bringing those skills into schools. Now is the time to make it formal. On that point, I will sit down.

Mr Durkan: I support the motion to advance the crucial need to educate all members of society in emergency life support skills.

I think that all Members here would agree that there is not a lot that you can do in two hours, given that it is such a short period. For the past two hours, I have been trying to write three speeches, so I certainly concur. Perhaps the brevity of this speech will illustrate that point. What we all can and must do is use two hours — that is all it takes — once a year to learn how to save a life.

Eighty per cent of people in Scandinavian countries and Germany have life-saving skills. It is clear that, here in Northern Ireland, we lag behind the rest of Europe by not promoting life-saving skills. In some parts of the USA, it is common practice that students are unable to graduate or even get a driver's licence without knowing those life-saving skills. I have a similar vision for Northern Ireland: our students should be able to assist their friends at school, their families at home and, later, in the workplace, their colleagues if they are faced with a situation in which they need to save a life.

St John Ambulance recently discovered that 69% of children in the UK would not know how to treat an injury if they were ever faced with such a situation. That is minor treatment, which, while awaiting help, is vital for survival. As the motion makes clear, time is of the essence: with every minute, an individual's chances of survival decline. The simple yet effective skills that ELS training can bring are, in many cases, just as important as ambulance and hospital treatment.

One must recognise the work already carried out by the NHS, namely the TV advertisements that other Members, including Mr Weir, mentioned earlier, which work to educate the mass public on how to recognise the signs of stroke and how to call an ambulance immediately. "When stroke strikes, act FAST": that is self-explanatory and shows the need to react quickly when someone has a stroke. There is also the very imaginative and effective advertisement by the British Heart Foundation, which Mr Weir mentioned earlier. If I ever had to come up with a health promotion campaign involving Vinnie Jones, it would have

been about testicular cancer, but the current one is equally effective. The British Heart Foundation is leading the way on promotion, education and training. We must work with it to reach out across the North and build on its already successful campaign.

Ms Ramsey spoke about investing to save and, touching on savings, I would like to draw the Member's attention to the fact that the cost of treating individuals who need cardiac surgical operations in the North of Ireland in 2009-2010 was £17.2 million, plus £3 million for treating Northern Irish patients in the Republic, and £0.7 million for treatment of our patients in the UK. Those costs could be significantly reduced if more individuals were able earlier to recognise and treat the signs and symptoms of heart disease or heart attack. We support the motion.

Mr McCarthy: Like other Members, I was delighted last week to wear the little red heart badge to promote the British Heart Foundation. I will continue to wear it through February, and indeed longer — probably until the next very worthy cause comes along. I will do that to show my full support for the efforts of the British Heart Foundation and, indeed, the Irish Heart Foundation to raise awareness of what happens when there is a sudden cardiac arrest, and what can and should be done without delay. I am delighted that this is an all-party motion to which everyone in the House will give their wholehearted support on behalf of everyone in Northern Ireland, in our community and our constituencies.

Every Member will know of someone who, unfortunately, has suffered an unexpected heart attack. Some will have survived but, unfortunately, some will have died. As the statistics show, here in Northern Ireland, in 2010, over 2,000 people died from heart disease, which I understand is an improvement on earlier years, but we must continue to work towards a further reduction.

We are all totally shocked when a young sportsperson collapses on the field of sport — or, indeed, any place of sport — and loses their life. It has, unfortunately, happened all too often, bringing overwhelming grief and loss not only to the immediate family but to the whole surrounding community. We always ask why a perfectly happy, healthy young athlete has been cut down. We do not have any answers.

Such a tragedy alerts everyone, and, in the past, great strides have been made by sporting organisations and voluntary groups to learn about what has happened, take preventative steps and, in a lot of cases, provide defibrillators. It has been mentioned before and, when this item appeared in the Order Paper, I got an e-mail from someone to mention the name of Dr Pantridge, who was the brains behind the defibrillator. I am doing as I was asked, and we have to honour that great man for his great invention.

We must pay tribute also to the many volunteers with their walking shoes, running shoes, bicycles and many other ideas to raise funds and purchase these life-saving defibrillators. At this point, I pay tribute to a senior senior citizen in my own constituency, from Portavogie, who did just that. He asked me to come and launch the walk around the Ards peninsula, which I was honoured to do. I walked with him to the bottom of the street and said that I had to attend to Assembly business, but he completed the walk and raised enough money to provide four defibrillators for the Ards peninsula. That is what it is all about: communities working together to provide them. Of course, they are not much good if there is nobody to use them, so it is important that people have the knowledge to use life-saving equipment.

People young and old know what to do in an emergency to help save a life. I pay tribute to the British Heart Foundation for its very successful work in running the Heartstart campaign, which has also been mentioned and which has given a great number of people the chance to train and learn about emergency life support (ELS) and, indeed, automated external defibrillators (AEDs).

I want to thank again our own Research and Information Service in the Assembly for all the relevant data and information that it has provided to Members. The ongoing efforts by so many people across the UK and indeed down South — I thank them for the work that they are doing. We are all working together to make things better, including, as Mark said, Vinny Jones, who I understand has made some sort of video. In our own north Down and Ards, the bus company has agreed to do some advertising to make people aware of the urgency of getting an ambulance when something like this happens.

It has been said many times that, here at Stormont, we need good joined-up government. Here is the best opportunity for the Department of Health, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment —

Mr Speaker: Time is almost up.

Mr McCarthy: — and the Department of Education to get together and provide the good leadership that we need. I support the motion on behalf of the Alliance Party.

Ms P Bradley: As Miss Ramsey said earlier, with these all-party motions we tend to stand up and repeat the same information over and over again. A lot has been said about the advertising campaign, so I thought for a brief moment that I might stand up and sing the Bee Gees' 'Stayin' Alive' to promote that campaign, but I decided that I would not subject the Members of this House to that. *[Laughter.]*

Any medical condition that causes premature death but can be prevented must become a priority for the Assembly to address. Heart and circulatory disease has been identified in the motion as Northern Ireland's biggest killer, yet in a number of cases it can be prevented by simple lifestyle and dietary changes. The promotion of many of the causes of heart and circulatory disease has been a priority for the Department of Health, and we have seen a large reduction in the number of deaths from the disease since 1980.

Although prevention is important, it is also important that the Assembly focus on what happens when heart disease reaches crisis point. Deaths from heart attacks occur every six minutes. The vast majority of these attacks happen in the individual's home.

That makes the teaching of emergency life support skills a vital tool in our fight to reduce the number of preventable premature deaths.

1.30 pm

Let us be clear about what we mean by emergency life support skills. Those skills are a set of actions needed to keep someone alive until professional help arrives. Through completing the training, the bystander will be able to identify the symptoms of heart attack, deal with a choking person, address serious bleeding and know how to help an unconscious breathing casualty.

It is a sad fact that many in Northern Ireland — a country that is often remarked on for the friendliness of its people — would simply not know how to help a casualty and are at risk of finding themselves in a situation where, through a lack of training, they simply have to stand by and watch someone die. The British Heart Foundation survey found that 52% of people in Northern Ireland would not try to resuscitate a casualty. The main reason given was a lack of knowledge and a fear of making the situation worse. With 81% of people in Northern Ireland claiming not to have received any training in the past five years and research indicating that training needs to be refreshed every year, that is a worrying situation.

Two main components are important for a positive outcome from a heart attack: first, bystander intervention with CPR increases survival for the patient by up to three times; and, secondly, the proximity of the patient to hospital. Every hour that a patient has to wait to receive a stent takes approximately one year off that patient's life. It is not always possible to ensure that a hospital is very close, but it should be possible to ensure that the maximum number of citizens in this country are trained to empower them to feel confident about helping someone when they need it most.

The success of emergency life support skills has been evident locally through a number of initiatives, one of which is in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. In that area, the Northern Ireland community resuscitation team, in partnership with the care trust and education board, has trained over 500 teachers in 235 schools, who in turn have trained over 15,000 individuals. Some of the schools involved are in my constituency. I can confirm that the feedback from those who have taken part has been positive, in terms not just of the skills acquired to save lives but of boosting individual schoolchildren's self-esteem and confidence.

ELS is unique in that it does not require participants to be great scholars or give any special medical treatment. Basic skills can be taught in as little as two hours out of the school year. Of children who participated in an ELS programme, 98% reported that they enjoyed the training, while 67% shared with family members the knowledge they gained. Children as young as 10 can be taught the full range of ELS, with younger children learning many other skills. It is important that we in the Assembly are not

insular when making important decisions. In a number of countries, teaching ELS is accepted as the norm. As Mr Durkan said, in order to graduate from high school or gain a driving licence in Seattle, for example, an individual has to learn first aid skills.

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

Ms P Bradley: The impact of that is that any individual is only ever 12 feet away from someone with ELS skills. I am in talks with the British Heart Foundation to try to get the Health Committee members trained in emergency life support skills.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I, too, support the motion, which is an important motion. Initially, I will quote information that we got from the British Heart Foundation stating that there are different service models for the provision of community emergency life support programmes throughout each of the five health and social care trusts. To ensure provision of an equitable service throughout all trusts, we need to develop and implement innovative, evidence-based community ELS initiatives in collaboration with relevant individuals and organisations in the community, voluntary, statutory and private sectors.

Funding for key posts in health and social care trusts ends on 1 April 2012. It is crucial that the Department and the health and social care trusts have in place a robust and sustainable community resuscitation strategy by that date to ensure that the excellent work that has been done in that area is maintained and local people have the greatest chance possible of surviving a cardiac arrest. The Minister is here, and I am sure that he has taken that on board.

Education, particularly in schools, is one issue that has been mentioned and that I would like to raise. Everybody has anecdotal evidence and stories of things that have happened. When I was in fourth year, a friend collapsed and very tragically died from a heart attack. In hindsight, people wonder whether it would have been a different story if someone had been trained to administer emergency life support skills or resuscitation. Later on, a brother of his tragically died at 17 years of age at a darts match. It was a congenital heart condition. Again, he was not able to be resuscitated. Had those skills been reasonably widely available, we could have had a different outcome.

I think that everybody would be disappointed if I did not mention the cross-border and all-Ireland dimension to this matter. If you consider that the rapid response vehicle for south Armagh was stationed in Warrenpoint, you would know that it would have taken about 40 minutes for it to get to south Armagh in a reasonable time. Fortunately, the Minister listened to the arguments, and, as far as I know, that rapid response vehicle is being relocated. I thank the Minister for taking that on board.

My colleague Sue Ramsey made the point about people in the Chamber having the appropriate skills. If people in the Chamber had the appropriate skills, I wonder how many from the other Benches would rush over to administer CPR to me. Surely that would be a sign — *[Interruption.]* I would have to think about the mouth-to-mouth. *[Laughter.]* Surely, if there was a stampede, it might be an indication of just how far we have come.

Mr Dunne: It is difficult to follow that. However, I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion.

Emergency life support skills are vital and can make an important difference between life and death. Regrettably, heart conditions are an ever-increasing problem in Northern Ireland, with heart and circulatory disease among the UK's biggest killers. It is crucial that we learn how to reduce the risk of heart problems and ensure that the necessary processes are in place to deal with these deadly conditions.

With the majority of cardiac arrests in the UK happening outside hospitals, having the necessary skills has never been more important. An improved infrastructure and a skilled network throughout Northern Ireland could help to ease the pressure and burden on our acute hospitals. As with many health-related problems, early detection and intervention are key to improving the chances of survival and health outcomes. That is reinforced by the fact that, for every minute after cardiac arrest that passes without defibrillation, the chances of survival are reduced by 10%.

Promoting ELS skills in schools should be encouraged. Although it is positive that nearly half our schools have provided training in ELS skills, more could be done. We should aim to reach many more, as school is often the best and most lasting learning environment. The earlier in life ELS skills are acquired, the greater

the benefit to everyone. They are practical skills for life that should be prioritised. Education is a central key in improving the health of people in this country. The Department must continue to prioritise public awareness campaigns that promote healthier lifestyles. Improving awareness among our children and young people is an effective and realistic measure that should be taken.

There is the potential for greater use of council-owned leisure centres throughout the country. Giving incentives to young and old to join would help to promote healthier lifestyles. The ongoing heart attack awareness campaign, which has been piloted in a number of areas, including my constituency of North Down, is an example of an effective public awareness campaign.

With the majority of cardiac arrests in the UK happening outside of hospital, it is vital that we equip our communities, workplaces and schools with the necessary skills to perform life support techniques. The first two links in the chain of survival can be delivered by ordinary people. We must maximise that important resource, which will ultimately improve the chances of survival.

Much good work has been done. It is a welcome statistic that there were almost half the number of heart disease deaths in Northern Ireland in 2010 that there were in 1980. However, there is always room for improvement in trying to make the lives of those whom we represent better. A joined-up approach is the way forward. I trust that we will, as a result, see many more people in Northern Ireland equipped with emergency life support skills.

Mr Kinahan: I am delighted to be able to speak on such an important motion. I am sorry that I was not here at the beginning of the debate and if I requote similar statistics.

If the issue that we are debating is acted on and taken forward, the potential is there for all of us to save many lives. We should all attach that level of importance to the debate. The magnitude of heart disease is alluded to in the motion, which states that it is "Northern Ireland's biggest killer". I will put that into context. British Heart Foundation statistics show that, in the United Kingdom, 83,000 people die every year as a result of heart attacks. In 2010, specifically in Northern Ireland, 2,200 people died of ischaemic heart disease, and 1,200 people died of strokes.

Northern Ireland has a history of innovation. The relevant example is the work of Professor Frank Pantridge — he has already been mentioned today — the physician, cardiologist and inventor. However, I wonder how many of you know the following fact about Northern Ireland: apparently, Air Force One has a defibrillator with nanotechnology that was developed in Belfast. We must congratulate Northern Ireland on leading the way.

The first way in which we can reduce levels of heart disease is by encouraging people to adopt a healthier lifestyle. I, too, could do much better. That means more exercise, healthier eating and reducing the levels of obesity, binge drinking and smoking. That would lead to fewer people having heart attacks in the first place, and Minister Poots has a role to play. Secondly, as you heard, we need to ensure that effective intervention is available as soon as possible after someone has a heart attack. The teaching of emergency life support skills is, therefore, essential. In June 2009, the then Health Minister, Ulster Unionist Michael McGimpsey, published the 'Service Framework for Cardiovascular Health and Wellbeing', standard 9 of which states:

"Health and social care professionals should work with schools, workplaces and communities to raise awareness of and access to emergency life support ... skills".

We also need to ensure that we have adequate hospital facilities with percutaneous coronary intervention — PCI — as that ensures better outcomes for those who have suffered a heart attack. The current Health Minister should look to build on the foundations that have been laid by Michael McGimpsey in this regard, as immediate CPR can improve the chances of survival by up to a factor of three, as the motion states.

I am aware that a pilot scheme in ELS skills is aimed at people involved in sports training. Changes in September 2011 also make it easier for small businesses to avail themselves of training in areas such as resuscitation. Those are examples of welcome developments.

The British Heart Foundation's Heartstart programme has operated since 1996, and it helps to train children in ELS skills. To date, through that programme, the British Heart Foundation has trained over 2.6 million people in ELS skills, of whom 760,000 are children. That is good work from the programme.

You heard from my colleague Paula Bradley that the North Eastern Education and Library Board has trained 500 teachers. I have also confirmed positive feedback from them. I wonder whether, when she is training the Health Committee, she should also train the Environment Committee and all other Committees. It is something that we should all know. Once, however, when I tried to show that I knew something, someone said, "Better that you stay away and we get someone who really knows". I might be more of a danger.

Lastly, I want to comment on the motion's cross-departmental aspect. We call on the Executive as a whole and, specifically, the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health to act appropriately. If the Assembly is to tackle the problem effectively, we all need to work together. I support the motion.

1.45 pm

Mr G Robinson: I must declare an interest in the debate. If it had not been for emergency life support skills administered to me by professional doctors at my local out-of-hours clinic, I would not be here today after I had a heart attack and consequently a double heart bypass in 2003. I congratulate all our emergency services and health workers who do such a fantastic job. I also encourage anyone to train and take up these vital emergency support skills; in my case, had I not been close to professional medical skills, other people with those support skills could have administered the skills that I needed. I also congratulate the British Heart Foundation. Its Heartstart programme has been adopted widely and currently saves lives.

Although I was fortunate to be close to what was then a 24-hour medical facility, many people in Northern Ireland are not that fortunate. It is, therefore, essential that the Assembly supports the provision of life-saving skills to as many people as possible. It is a shocking statistic that, for every minute after a heart attack that defibrillation is not given, the chance of surviving the heart attack drops by 10%. It is not possible for a doctor or nurse to be in every street at the same time. Therefore, members of the public must be taught those skills. CPR is a lifesaver. That is a fact. I want to see as many people as possible in Northern Ireland given that skills set.

I support fully the aims of the motion and welcome the approach that it suggests. The

use of community groups, workplaces and the education system will give it as wide an impact as possible and maximise the number of people who take CPR skills on board. Everyone would welcome young people having those skills. I ask all Members to support the motion, so that, in every workplace, community and school, there will be at least one person who can take the speedy action required in the event that someone has a heart attack and save their life.

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the motion and the opportunity for the Assembly to consider this important issue. Heart disease is second to cancer as the main cause of death in Northern Ireland. In 2010, it accounted for around 2,770 deaths. Of those deaths, 1,480 were actually due to acute myocardial infarction, which is better known to people outside the health system as a heart attack.

With regard to the context of the debate, many people have mentioned Frank Pantridge, in whom I have a particular interest. He was a resident of Hillsborough for many years. He is a fascinating character. He could be quite crotchety. However, sometimes, that goes with brilliance. I see Mr McNarry laughing. That does not mean that everybody who is crotchety is brilliant. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McNarry: I just want to remind the House that it is actually very good for your health to be crotchety from time to time. It means that you relieve yourself of the painful things that, sometimes, happen in life. I know that the Minister is all about relieving pain. I congratulate him on the delivery of that and the service that he brings to the country.

Mr Poots: I thank my friend Mr McNarry for his kind response on this occasion. I wish him well.

When he was a young man, Professor Pantridge went to do his bit in the Second World War. He was taken prisoner — I believe that it was in Singapore — and was put in a prisoner of war camp. To the day he died, he greatly resented the fact that, as a physician, he was not allowed to care for other prisoners. His hands were smashed up, and he could not carry out surgery. However, as a cardiologist, he evidenced many people coming to him too late for him to provide appropriate care and treatment. That is why the motion is important. As a cardiologist, he recognised that something had to be done at

an early stage, and that is why he devised the defibrillator.

Although Pantridge got a lot of recognition for that invention, every person who has a wonderful concept needs to put that concept into reality. Just as architects need engineers to make sure that their grand designs can hit the ground, Pantridge needed an engineer for his concept. I understand that that was Dr John Anderson. He is still alive, but he has not got the recognition that he perhaps should have had for his role. I do not believe that Pantridge got the recognition that he should have had either. He should have been properly recognised for the services that he provided. He is a hugely respected character around the world, but he did not get that recognition here in the United Kingdom. I am glad that Lisburn City Council took the steps that it did. However, many others who have benefited from the honours system and other things have made substantially less of a contribution to the well-being of Northern Ireland and beyond than Frank Pantridge has.

To some extent, that was a little diversion. However, if a cardiologist recognised the importance of early response, it is also useful for the House to recognise its importance and its benefits. Each year in Northern Ireland, over 3,500 people are admitted to hospital with heart attacks. The Ambulance Service reported that more than 1,300 cardiac arrests happened outside a hospital environment in 2010-11, thus the earlier issue. The UK-wide figures show that around 30,000 people suffer such heart attacks each year. What is important is that fewer than 10% of those who suffer out-of-hospital cardiac arrest will survive to be discharged from hospital. About three quarters of out-of-hospital cardiac arrests happen in our own homes. Therefore, when someone suffers a cardiac arrest, quick intervention is literally vital, and early resuscitation is essential to give that person any chance of survival. Survival is known to be higher in instances in which a bystander has initiated CPR, and, in the case of shockable out-of-hospital cardiac arrests, immediate CPR can improve a person's chances of survival by up to a factor of three. That is why it is important that, in addition to statutory provision, as many members of the public as is possible are trained in ELS.

I want to briefly take stock of existing measures that are addressing those problems. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service operates

a fleet of 40 rapid response vehicles to get to victims as quickly as possible. Overall, the Ambulance Service currently responds to 73% of category A calls within eight minutes. It is important to note that all Ambulance Service call-takers are trained to instruct callers, where appropriate, on the provision of CPR. That means that the service can provide immediate life-saving instructions by telephone and that anyone can be a lifesaver.

Many communities in Northern Ireland are rural and, in recognition of that, the Ambulance Service has worked with local communities to set up first responder schemes. First responders are trained members of the public who are called to an emergency by the Ambulance Service. They are not a substitute for the Ambulance Service but are complementary to it. They are volunteers who live or work in a community or a village. First responders can attend in only a limited number of emergencies, such as those that involve chest and heart problems, choking, convulsions, electrocution, diabetic issues and unconsciousness. First responder schemes are now in place in Islandmagee; the glens of Antrim; Slaughtneil, north of Maghera; Broughderg, north-west of Cookstown; Loughguile, County Antrim; the Irvinestown and Enniskillen areas; and on Rathlin Island. The Ambulance Service is currently working to expand the first responder scheme in other areas, including Londonderry, parts of Tyrone and Fermanagh and the Ards peninsula.

Measures aimed at increasing the number of people trained in ELS skills are currently being taken forward. The service framework for cardiovascular health and well-being, which was published in June 2009, recognises the importance of training people in emergency life support skills. In the service framework, standard 9 states:

“Health and social care professionals should work with schools, workplaces and communities to raise awareness of and access to emergency life support (ELS) skills”.

The Northern Ireland omnibus survey of January 2010 reported that 26% of respondents answered yes when asked whether they had received training in CPR in the past five years. As part of the implementation of the service framework, the Public Health Agency is working with the health and social care trusts and voluntary providers, including the British Heart Foundation, to ensure that the various

programmes that are in place are co-ordinated and integrated. The aim is to provide quality-assured training in CPR equitably across the Province.

I am aware that the Health and Social Care Board is considering a business case for the community development resuscitation officer posts in each of the five trusts. Those staff would be responsible for the delivery of ELS training in schools, communities and across the health service to front line staff. At this stage, it would not be appropriate for me to pre-empt the conclusion of the board's consideration of the proposal.

In addition, my Department has established a pilot scheme to assess the feasibility of training volunteers in ELS skills and the use of the automated external defibrillator to a level where they can cascade the training to others. The volunteers are from organisations involved in sport, including the IFA and the GAA, and some district councils, including Belfast, Lisburn and Derry city councils. When trained, those volunteers will cascade that training to others in their clubs and organisations, which will create a cohort of trained individuals who may be able to intervene in an emergency situation. The pilot will be evaluated at the end of next month.

I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge the value and scale of the contribution made by community and voluntary organisations in Northern Ireland. CPR training programmes such as those delivered by the British Heart Foundation, ABC for Life, the British Red Cross and St John Ambulance are a vital part of the picture. The British Heart Foundation, through its Heartstart UK initiative, has done excellent work in training the public at large in emergency life support skills. It has provided training to a wide range of people and organisations in the community, including schools, businesses, cardiac patients and their families.

The issues cut across the boundaries between Departments' remits. The motion refers to workplaces and schools, as well as communities. Employers are required to make suitable first aid provision in all workplaces under the Health and Safety (First-Aid) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1982. Changes introduced in September 2011 make it easier for small businesses to avail themselves of training in basic first aid, including resuscitation.

The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's guide to safety at sports grounds requires managers of sports venues to ensure that

proper first aid, medical and emergency life support provision is available at any event with more than 5,000 spectators. In schools, the revised curriculum provides flexibility to introduce ELS training. In addition, the extended schools programme affords opportunities for training young people, parents and teachers. Schools have discretion in sourcing that training and the related materials. Some voluntary organisations have provided schools with guidance materials and resources. For example, the British Heart Foundation's Heartstart pack has been made available to teachers.

The motion calls for the investment that is needed to deliver ELS training in every school, community and workplace. I share that aspiration, in spite of the fact that my resources are finite. The challenge, as ever, is to make the best possible use of the resources that we have. As I have indicated, there is a great deal of existing work that we can build on.

2.00 pm

Mr McCallister: I thank all the Members who participated in the debate. I also echo Mr Weir's words of thanks to the Business Committee for facilitating the debate being held so soon. I gather that some parties had to move slots to accommodate it. I welcome that it has cross-party support. Much has been said in the debate. I suppose, as the saying goes, all has been said, but it has just not been said by everyone yet. I do not propose to take up too much time summing up, because there is broad support for this across the Chamber.

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

Members relayed personal stories. My colleague Mike Nesbitt, Mr McCarthy and Mr Robinson all relayed very personal stories and expressed concern that they may not have the emergency life skills that we would like to see right across our communities. Others, of course, were very thankful and grateful that people nearby had those skills. None of us quite knows how we would react if faced with that situation. We hope that the training that we were, hopefully, given at some point in our lives would kick in and that we would have some idea of what to do.

Mr G Robinson: I thank John for giving way. I had about 10 minutes to 15 minutes to get round to the doctor. If it had not been for my brother, who came to me very quickly at about

6.30 am, I would definitely not be here today. He did not have the skills, but he was on hand to get me to the doctor as soon as possible.

Mr McCallister: That highlights the question of how we would deal with such a difficult situation if faced with it. Would we be able to cope or be of assistance in a critical situation? As every Member said, time is very much of the essence when someone is faced with that. We have had the stats, and, as Members and the Minister said, the difference that an early and timely intervention can make when someone has a heart attack is enormous. The outcomes are better, and there are significantly higher rates of survival. There is massive benefit for everyone involved. It would make a big difference to society, as there is a real human cost.

I recognise the success that we have had over the last 30 years, as Mr Weir pointed out. It is well worth celebrating that the figure has gone from some 5,000 to fewer than half of that. It is also worth noting the work and contribution of many in the community and voluntary sectors. Organisations such as the British Heart Foundation continue to champion the issue.

Ms Bradley talked about wanting to get the Health Committee involved. The Health Committee in the previous Assembly mandate did some basic training, which was very kindly facilitated by the British Heart Foundation. We are overdue a rerun of that, so I think that she will find the rest of the Committee very supportive of the idea.

We need to get training out to people and to look at where we can do it. Of course, many are doing it already. Ms Ramsey, the Chair of the Committee, talked about some of the groups that do it. It may be rugby, football, GAA or other sports clubs, church groups, Boys' Brigade, Girls' Brigade, Scout Association, Girl Guides, Young Farmers' Clubs or whatever. We have to get that training out. The Minister talked about getting the training out and how you cascade it through the system so that we end up with many more people trained in life skills, which is what we want to see right across Northern Ireland.

So, it is important that groups of all ages and from all backgrounds be given training that is not only basic but that cascades down and is renewed relatively regularly. It is about giving people the confidence to intervene whenever they see someone in need, as well as about

giving them the skills to make a much more positive, as opposed to a negative, contribution.

There is widespread support for the motion. The Minister talked about where we are now with this, and he mentioned some of the positives, such as the rapid response vehicles. Those vehicles are the first responders in certain areas, most of which he named. A lot of those areas are in rural and isolated locations. Time is critical when you are dealing with an emergency event. It is, therefore, right and proper that we roll out the deployment of those vehicles to as many areas as possible, particularly given that it is more problematic for the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to get transport, travelling at speed, to an event within a very tight time frame.

I am encouraged by the widespread support for the motion. Many Members, as well as the Minister, mentioned the need to change our lifestyles. Life support training is a hugely important element of that. However, we want to see not only the numbers falling but people developing a much healthier and positive lifestyle through a range of actions. Mr Dunne talked about encouraging people to use council facilities, a point with which I agree and support. We also want to encourage people to use our great outdoors. They can use the many walkways round this city and even those on the Stormont estate. That would make an enormous contribution to their health. We also need to tackle obesity, smoking and binge drinking and to look at diet, because action on all those things combined will make a huge contribution to a healthy heart and mind, which is where we are trying to get to.

It is encouraging that we have had widespread support from all the political parties. The debate has been useful in emphasising the importance of emergency life support skills training. That is what we want to see. We want to see such training cascading down through society, from schools to sports clubs to workplaces. That is what is important, because it will ensure that, should one of us ever be struck down by a heart attack, someone nearby can come to our aid or, indeed, we can go to someone else's aid. I will conclude by thanking all those who contributed, including the Minister.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly is concerned that heart and circulatory disease remains Northern Ireland's biggest killer; notes that, for every minute that passes after a cardiac arrest without defibrillation, the chance of survival is reduced by around 10% but that immediate cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) can improve the chances of survival by up to a factor of three; further notes that, last year, more than 30,000 people were trained in emergency life support skills (ELS), including CPR, by the British Heart Foundation's (BHF) Heartstart programme; supports BHF's campaign to ensure that all schools, communities, and workplaces, provide ELS training; and calls on the Executive, the health and social care trusts and the education bodies to work together to provide the necessary investment to deliver this training to every school, community and workplace.

Welfare Reform

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As two amendments to the motion have been selected, up to one hour and 45 minutes will be allowed for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The proposer of each amendment will have 10 minutes to propose and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Durkan: I beg to move

That this Assembly believes that the coalition Government's welfare cuts and major aspects of their welfare reform agenda are having and will continue to have a significant detrimental impact on our community; recognises that the impact will be more severe for Northern Ireland given our historically high levels of disadvantage and our higher proportions of families with children and people in receipt of disability living allowance; notes that the accumulated cost of welfare cuts to the local economy could reach £450m; and calls on the Executive to make opposition to a wide range of the welfare reforms their highest priority and to immediately pursue robust negotiations with the coalition Government to pursue all possible legal and operational flexibilities and financial support to mitigate the impact of the welfare cuts and changes imposed on Northern Ireland.

People across the North are already suffering because of welfare cuts, many of which are being imposed prior to the introduction of universal credit. That will simply allow the Tory-led Government to say that their welfare reform, in the guise of universal credit, will result in more money being paid in benefits. That fallacy seems to have been swallowed and has certainly been peddled by some in the Chamber. Although that agenda is hurting vulnerable people across these islands, its impact will be even harsher here in Northern Ireland.

Two weeks ago, a delegation from my party met Lord Freud and the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State spoke of tweaking universal credit, and we told him that, if that was his message, we would actively oppose it. My colleagues told Freud that housing benefit changes in particular would not work, given the segregated character of housing in many parts of Northern Ireland. The firm evidence of less access to affordable childcare here — very different from and much worse than in England — is a central feature of how here is different,

and welfare needs to reflect that, given that the purported purpose of reform is to help people back into work.

The levels of disadvantage and disability, the emotional, mental and physical needs resulting from years of conflict and the risk of alienation mean that welfare needs to be different here. That is why we call on the Assembly and the Executive to escalate their efforts in opposing the imposition of those draconian reforms here.

Let me be clear: the SDLP does not oppose the idea of simplifying the social security process. We do not oppose in any way the concept of getting people back to work when or if they are able. We do not oppose welfare reform, but we do oppose unfair reform, and unfair is precisely what many of the reforms are. Previously, we debated changes to incapacity benefit entitlement, the assessment of unwell people as fit to work and their being harassed to look for work. Little evidence has been received that those work capability assessments take into account the true effects of some people's conditions or their ability to work, particularly in cases of mental illness and conditions such as Parkinson's disease, which fluctuate in severity.

We accept the need to prevent people from abusing the system, but we must not create a system that abuses people. Changes to housing benefit are also certain to have a much more pronounced impact over the coming months. The change to the upper age limit for the shared accommodation rate has the potential to make homeless thousands of young men and women or result in them living in Dickensian conditions. Sticking with Dickens, I think that, once again, it is a tale of two cities, as the fallout from that cut will be much greater here than across the water, given the dearth of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) here. The reforms are not about simplifying the system; they are purely a Tory tool to cut costs.

The Tories also have great expectations for PIPs, the personal independence payments, which are to replace disability living allowance (DLA). The expenditure on PIPs will be 20% less than that on DLA. That is money coming directly from the pockets of people in need. That restructuring — sorry, reduction — is already under way, with people being assessed as being able to walk 100 metres after barely demonstrating the ability to walk 10 metres. Northern Ireland has a higher percentage of people on DLA than the

rest of the UK, which is largely attributable to the legacy of the Troubles. We need a unique solution for what is a unique situation. The proposed changes to DLA also throw up many consequences for carers and, in turn, their families who rely on the carer's allowance. Have the Government estimated how many carers will be affected or, indeed, how much those carers save the public purse? It is essential, in our opinion, that eligibility for carer's allowance is established through both levels of the PIP daily living component to protect carers and enable them to continue providing care.

2.15 pm

These cuts will hurt people who work, too. The divide-and-conquer approach of the coalition Government is to portray welfare reform as a move to cut down on scroungers and gain support from working people to do so. However, working families with disabled children, of whom, again, there is a higher percentage here than elsewhere on these islands, will be worse off to the tune of £1,400 a week — sorry, a year: that was a Freudian slip. That, along with the other reductions in benefits, will inevitably have a knock-on effect on the wider economy, with people having less money to spend on essentials, let alone small luxuries, and local businesses, shops, cafes, taxis and hairdressers will all share the pain at a time when they are already suffering. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated the cost to the Northern Ireland economy at £450 million. Can we afford that?

We support incentives for people to get off benefits. However, there must also be work for people to get into, and I welcome the capital programmes announced by the Executive last week and the jobs that they will inevitably create. Any Government should focus on job creation rather than austerity measures that only serve to perpetuate the dire economic situation. We also support a simplification of the system, particularly any measure that will streamline the tax credit system, which is a real nightmare, especially for cross-border workers.

We are calling on the Assembly to prioritise the issue of welfare reform. We call for the establishment of an ad hoc Committee to optimise our collective ability to scrutinise the Bill and the wider welfare reform agenda. That agenda will have effects much wider than solely the remit of the Committee for

Social Development, and we believe that fuller participation in the Committee Stage of the Bill can help us identify potential wriggle room and chances for damage limitation.

Although Members here are aware of the repercussions of the legislation being handed over from Westminster, the real danger in us blindly accepting it is where it might lead. There is simply too much detail lacking in the Welfare Reform Bill, and when the primary legislation is passed in Britain, it is open to future changes and future abuse. We have seen the lack of social conscience of the current coalition Government, so imagine what we might expect from a single party Tory Government in future.

We acknowledge attempts made by the Minister — universal credit where it is due — but they are a safety net, not a solution. Hardship funds need to be more substantial and more sustainable. We will have signed up to parity on Tory terms. This is our chance to get a handle on the issue and to shape our own primary legislation. Are we not legislators? I am sure that every Member in the House has at some stage been asked by a constituent or by a visiting school why we got into politics, and I am sure that most, if not all, of us have, at some stage, given the hackneyed answer of, "To make a difference." Well, let us make a difference; or let us at least try.

Mr Easton: I beg to move amendment No 1: Leave out all after 'Assembly' and insert

"reaffirms its unanimous support for welfare reforms that are aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; notes with concern the negative impact that many of the coalition Government's proposed welfare reforms could have on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his robust engagement with the coalition Government and to work with Executive colleagues via the Executive subgroup on welfare reform to pursue, where possible, measures to mitigate the negative impacts of the proposed welfare reforms on Northern Ireland."

The subject matter in front of us today is huge, with many complex issues within it, and will, by its nature, impact on many in our society. However, one could be forgiven for being under the impression that the party proposing the motion was the pioneer, indeed the visionary, that spotted something that the rest of us had missed. While the rest of us were asleep

on the watch, they noticed that the reform of the welfare state could negatively impact upon people in Northern Ireland. Indeed, on reading the SDLP motion, one could be forgiven for thinking that that party is the buffer, the resistance, the Dad's Army to welfare reform, while the rest of the House welcomed it unchallenged. Even more alarming, many would also be forgiven for thinking, after reading the SDLP motion, that the Minister for Social Development and the Executive Committee were walking, at best, blindfolded or, at worst, all-embracing into welfare reform hosted by the Tory-Lib coalition Government at Westminster. We all have concerns.

I hope in the next few minutes to bring a little reality and perspective back into the discussion and address some of inaccuracies of the motion as it stands. We all recognise that the current welfare state needs reformed. It has grown beyond all recognition from that intended by the Beveridge report of 1942, which was followed by the establishment of the National Health Service and national insurance scheme by the then Labour Administration in 1948. However, reform of the welfare state and welfare reform as being pushed through by the coalition Tory-Lib Government at Westminster are two very different animals.

Back in 2009, my party colleague and Member for Strangford Mr Simon Hamilton brought a motion before the House urging the then SDLP Minister for Social Development to work with Westminster to mitigate against the worst effects of the welfare reform proposals, recognising parity implications but looking at administration and operational flexibility.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Member give way?

Mr Easton: No, the Member will not give way. That motion, which included calls for reform to simplify the system and, indeed, help people back into work got unanimous support, including from the SDLP.

I believe that I speak for everyone in the House, or, at least, I hope I do, when I say that a welfare system that means that work does not pay is not acceptable, nor is a welfare system that encourages general worklessness as acceptable and, frankly speaking, neither is it affordable. A welfare system that provides a safety net is something that we should be proud of, but it cannot become a lifestyle choice or, indeed, a

benefits trap. We need to re-establish the contract between the taxpayer and the benefits system.

The SDLP has a new found role as the resistance against welfare reform, and I cannot let that pass without pointing out that party's track record in recent years. It is the same SDLP, albeit with a few changes of captain at the head of the great ship SDLP, the Minister of which introduced regulations to implement some of the most hard-hitting welfare reforms to date. SDLP regulations brought forward included the cutting of mortgage rate relief and the switching of people from ISA to ESA.

I cannot speak for anyone else, but my constituency office has noticed a significant number of people being turned down for ESA and being forced on to jobseeker's allowance as a result of the SDLP's regulations. I understand the reason why those regulations were implemented. The same parity rule that applies now applied then, but the SDLP cannot pick and choose what attitude it takes to such matters depending on the day.

My party colleagues have been faithful in representing the people who elected them at Westminster, and the voting record bears witness to that fact. The DUP MPs voted against the Tory-Lib Government and all the Lords' reforms bar one. One has to ask at this critical stage what the track record of other Northern Ireland parties that have MPs elected to Westminster is. How have they used their votes in the House of Commons to stand against the negative elements of the current Welfare Reform Bill where it matters and when it matters?

The tone and implication of the SDLP's motion suggest that the robust negotiations with the Tory-Lib coalition Government have not started. Further, the implication is that the Minister and the Executive are not pursuing all measures to mitigate the impact of welfare reform. That is clearly untrue, and one cannot help wondering if point-scoring within a section of the electorate is of greater importance to the SDLP than scaremongering some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Post-election, my party colleague Nelson McCausland became the Minister for Social Development. One of his first actions as Minister was to engage with Lord Freud, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Minister with responsibility for bringing forward the Tory-Lib coalition Government's Welfare Reform Bill. He

has been in written communication with Iain Duncan Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and, in the months since coming into office, has had a number of meetings with Lord Freud and Maria Miller, Disability Minister, who is responsible for bringing forward DLA and child maintenance reforms.

Officials working on the Minister's behalf from the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Social Security Agency are in London or engaged with officials from DWP on a weekly, often daily, basis. I understand that the Executive have established a subcommittee whose sole role and remit is to look at welfare reform and its impacts on Northern Ireland. This subcommittee, which I am sure the Minister will speak about, is made up of all the parties represented on the Executive, and includes Alex Attwood from the SDLP.

We all recognise that there are difficulties with the reforms as proposed by the Tory-Lib coalition Government, but we need to get the facts right. The accumulated cost of welfare reform is £450 million, according to the motion. On other days, it ranges up to £600 million. We are currently in receipt of £5 billion annually from the Treasury by way of benefit payments, and by 2015, it is expected that benefits payments to Northern Ireland will have increased by 18%. Let us not alarm people unduly.

As an Assembly and Executive we need to continue, rather than start, to ensure that we have pursued all avenues possible with the Government. We need to continue the process to identify issues where possible, and, more importantly, identify those who will be most affected, before the Bill gets Royal Assent. We need to act with a degree of maturity, recognising the realities of where we are and what limited opportunities we have to make changes within the confines of parity.

I ask that Members consider this amendment, as it reflects, in my opinion, a more pragmatic approach to the real issues facing us in the coming months. The sentiments of the Sinn Féin amendment are largely reflected in this proposed amendment. We need to ensure that the system that comes out of these reforms will protect the needs of the genuinely most vulnerable in our society; helps people back into economic activity, addressing the very real issues of general worklessness; and

removes the benefit traps that people often find themselves in today.

I support the work and efforts of the Minister and the Executive subcommittee, and look forward to hearing the outworkings of their discussions.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time commences at 2.30 pm, I suggest that the House takes it ease until that time. The debate will continue after Question Time, when Mickey Brady will be the next Member to speak.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

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

Oral Answers to Questions

Culture, Arts and Leisure

Mr Deputy Speaker: I advise Members that questions 3, 4, 13 and 14 have been withdrawn and will require written answers.

Queen Elizabeth II: Diamond Jubilee

1. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what events her Department is planning to celebrate Her Majesty's diamond jubilee. (AQO 1329/11-15)

2. **Mr Moutray** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what plans her Department has to commemorate the Queen's diamond jubilee. (AQO 1330/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 1 and 2.

Centenaries and significant anniversaries during the decade ahead will provide all of us on this island with an opportunity to gain greater understanding of our shared past and how it shapes Irish and British identities and, indeed, relationships today. The key issue is not whether the events are remembered but how we remember them. I am supportive of an inclusive, non-triumphalist and strategic approach to commemorations, and I have fully endorsed the principles that the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund developed to remember the past in the context of an inclusive and accepting society. I believe that that is the way forward.

The arts and cultural sectors can provide innovative ways to remember the past. Arm's-length bodies supported by my Department can help to tell stories behind the decade of centenaries and other significant anniversaries. Local councils can also now use the community festival fund to support an inclusive approach to remembering the past. Indeed, a recent event at St Mary's University College on the Falls Road marked the centenary of a speech by Winston

Churchill in the grounds of Belfast Celtic football club. It was a drama production that brought the speech back to life and demonstrated the role that arts can play in telling stories, as well as the different perspectives of that period.

Mr McClarty: I thank the Minister for her answer. She spoke for one minute and 25 seconds and gave me no answer whatsoever. As head of the Department dedicated to events such as this, does the Minister not accept that it is the responsibility of her Department to plan such significant events to mark what is an extremely historic event — the diamond jubilee of Her Majesty — which is of great significance —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think the Member has asked the question.

Mr McClarty: — to the greater number of people? I have asked the question, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Ms Ní Chuilín: My predecessor left a very narrow brief for looking at commemorations and significant events. The brief was to look at the plantation, the Titanic and the period between 1912 and 1922. I am on the record as saying that I am trying to broaden that out to make it more inclusive. That process is still ongoing, and I am in discussion with Executive colleagues about how we do that. However, I have said that a fund is available for councils that want to commemorate events.

Mr Moutray: I declare an interest as a member of Craigavon Borough Council. Given that a number of local authorities plan to mark and fund this significant milestone, does the Minister agree that her Department should put in place appropriate funding arrangements to celebrate this momentous occasion?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The budget for looking at commemorations and significant events has not yet been set. Members of local authorities asked whether they could use the local festivals fund for commemorations. I would like to clarify now that we are not instructing local councils to use that because we feel that local festivals have been very productive and successful. However, we are looking at ways in which we can support this. In the meantime, we look for groups such as the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund to see whether they can come forward with a funding package that will provide better cohesion.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answers. I am a little confused. Is there funding that is outside council funding that is specifically for artistic and cultural events for the whole of Northern Ireland that we can look at proudly at the end of the year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding that we give to councils for local festivals is still there. The question that keeps coming up is this: are local councils to use those funds for festivals for commemorative events? They can do so if they wish. Some councils are reluctant to do that because they feel that the funds that they have are limited enough as it is and are for the community festivals that they have already planned throughout the year. As I said in my answer to Stephen Moutray's question, the only involvement that the Community Relations Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund have in the project is in setting the guidelines. Perhaps we need to expand on funding opportunities. Through the course of this, we will try to find out how we can complement that, if at all possible. At this stage, we are not instructing local government to use its festival funds for commemorations or to mark events.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her answer, in which she mentions a shared past. What specific steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we commemorate a decade of centenaries in a way that builds a shared future?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The work of all Departments, local government and the Community Relations Council and, in particular, the guidelines of the Heritage Lottery Fund are very mindful of building shared and better relations. Regardless of our political differences, we need to ensure that the approach that we take is based on respect and on the principle that our attitude to commemorations needs to be non-triumphalist. That is probably the best legacy for building and developing better, shared and good relations for us all.

Mr Allister: May I remind the Minister that the Pledge of Office she took included the words:

"promote the interests of the whole community"?

She has managed to answer questions on the diamond jubilee thus far without mentioning it. She is previously on record as saying, in a written reply, that there will be no extra funding for communities wanting to celebrate the jubilee. She has no plans to co-operate with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can the Member come to his question?

Mr Allister: Furthermore, she will not meet the Queen. Has she changed her bigoted stance on any of those issues?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not feel that there is an answer that I could give to Mr Allister's question without feeding some of the nonsense, so I am not going to play with him.

Fishing Rights

5. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure what proportion of the fishing rights of inland rivers and waterways is in public ownership. (AQO 1333/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Private fishing rights are held and managed by a variety of interests, which include local angling clubs, landowners and commercial operators. Public fishing rights are also held by a number of interests, which include local councils, NI Water and DCAL. DCAL's ownership of fishing rights is managed through the operation of a public angling estate that comprises 63 game, coarse and mixed fisheries for which the rights are either owned or leased. As there is no central register of all fishing rights, the Department cannot establish the proportion of fishing rights of inland rivers and waterways in public ownership.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she outline the process through which fishing rights can be traced?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Some of the process includes the tracking of ownership of fishing rights, and it usually requires initial enquiries to Land and Property Services in order to establish the ownership of land adjacent to waters. Registered land is divided into distinct parcels, each with a folio number. Examination of each folio should reveal the history of ownership of the land and may also make reference to fishing, sport or other water rights. If ownership of fishing rights is still not clear, the searcher can contact the Department of the Environment's rates office to check if the fishery is rated. In addition to that, the valuation office of the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Public Record Office can be used as useful sources of information for tracing fishing rights.

Mr Dallat: The Minister will be aware that many of the fishing rights date back to the time of the plantation. What plans does she have to make them more relevant, place them in the hands of local communities and get rid of the draconian ways of divvying up fishing rights on our rivers?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary. In addition to what I said to my colleague Pat Sheehan, I believe that, in this day and age, we should have an inventory of fishing rights and land ownership. I know of the Member's interest in waterways and inland fisheries. We are looking to see how we can establish a register, but it is proving increasingly cumbersome. It is something that the Department has to tackle because, particularly if there is a claim against a piece of land, the Department should have the information without undue delay. I agree that the issue has been ongoing for a long time. It will take time to sort out, but we are determined to try our best to do that.

Mr Swann: On the management of the public or derelict waterways, can the Minister state, once and for all, whether she has directed her Department to make catch and release mandatory?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is certainly not a supplementary question, but I am happy to answer it.

Mr Swann: It is.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Well, the question was about fishing rights and ownership of rivers, but I understand the campaign that the Member supports. We have asked the angling community in particular for a voluntary catch-and-release programme as part of the conditions for their licences. For anything outside of that, as the Member knows full well, I will need legal advice. That advice is being sought, and, after the debate tabled for tomorrow, which the Member is aware of, and ongoing discussions with legal teams, we will bring forward a position that will be totally clear. If the Member is still not clear, we will be totally clear on any mandatory positions on fishing rights. I assume that he is not talking about anglers; he is talking about nets.

Ulster Canal

6. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the current position on the Erne-Clones stretch of the Ulster canal. (AQO 1334/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the NSMC waterways meeting on 14 February, Ministers received a short presentation on the work in progress on the Ulster canal project from upper Lough Erne to Clones. Planning applications were lodged with Monaghan County Council, Clones Town Council and Cavan County Council on 25 October and with the Department of the Environment's Planning Service on 28 October. Cavan County Council has granted planning permission. Monaghan County Council and Clones Town Council have requested further information and clarification. Waterways Ireland is considering those requests and other comments forwarded in response to the planning applications. The relevant land requisition maps and papers are being prepared in readiness for the land procurement process. Pending a successful outcome to the planning process, the land acquisition will be ready to be commenced when funding is committed. Recent information indicates that nine months is the average time it takes for a compulsory purchase order, and Waterways Ireland has in place a draft programme that takes into account planning permission, land acquisition and the letting of the contract.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can the Minister tell us how long it will take to complete the work if planning permission is granted?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I have just outlined, the planning applications have been submitted, and, pending a successful outcome to the planning process, a land acquisition process will be commenced. After that, the contract for the construction phase of the project should be awarded in 2013, following planning approval and the completion of land acquisition. The decision to award a contract will be subject to funds for the capital costs being made available.

Mr Humphrey: I welcome the announcement by the Minister on the Ulster canal and the areas she spoke of. In relation to the stretch of the canal from the boat club at Stranmillis to Lisburn, can the Minister give any comfort to those of us who represent Belfast and Lagan Valley, given that Belfast is the tourism and transportation hub for Northern Ireland?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I recently met members of Belfast City Council and the trust on this issue. The stretch of the towpath, which I think is 11

miles in total, has become one of our prime tourist attractions, and there is huge local involvement. I plan to have a further meeting with Belfast City Council estates management, along with councillors for that area, to see how we can progress these. One of the outstanding things is community engagement, particularly for people living in that area, and that has to be brought forward. I still have not received information on how that will be done. The rest of the information on how this can be processed has been forwarded to Belfast City Council.

2.45 pm

Ulster Canal

7. Mr A Maginness asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure for an update on her discussions with the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on setting up an interagency group to determine ways to advance the Ulster canal project. (AQO 1335/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Despite the difficult economic climate, I am keen to continue my work with my counterpart Jimmy Deenihan TD, Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, to find ways of progressing the Ulster canal project and indeed many other areas of mutual interest. My officials have been in discussion with those in the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Waterways Ireland about the setting up of an interagency group to examine other options for financing and completing the project. I am aware that Minister Deenihan met senior officials of Monaghan County Council, Fermanagh District Council and Waterways Ireland to explore the proposal to set up this group. At the North/South Ministerial Council inland waterways meeting on 14 February, the restoration of the Ulster canal from upper Lough Erne to Clones was discussed, and it was agreed that the terms of reference for the establishment of the interagency group should be drafted and sent to the sponsor Departments for further consideration.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for her answer. I take it that the interagency group has not yet been fully established but will be established. What time period does the Minister estimate it will be established in? In addition —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think there are a number of questions there. Minister, please.

Mr A Maginness: Well, OK.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not too sure what other questions the Member anticipated, but he is free to write to me, and I will be happy to respond. At last week's sectoral NSMC meeting on waterways, the role of setting up this interagency group and setting forward the terms of reference were agreed. To be quite honest with you, I do not know how long that will take. I do not anticipate it being long-drawn-out or going into a matter of months. Like the Member, I am looking forward to seeing what these are and how we can enhance the potential for funding this stretch of the canal.

Mr McKay: Does the Minister recognise the benefit of the canal, not only to the mid-west Ulster region but to County Antrim and County Derry? Will she outline the process to settle any potential land disagreements in regard to this?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate the potential of the Ulster canal and our waterways, particularly for tourism. The issue of disputes or potential disputes has been raised consistently, particularly in relation to how it may affect landowners. In seeking planning permission for these projects, Waterways Ireland engages with all the local landowners who may be affected and attempts to come to a satisfactory agreement. In the event that Waterways Ireland does not have compulsory purchase power to acquire lands, the appropriate compensation, if it is not agreed, will be set by an independent arbiter. I appreciate the concern that the Member has raised about how this may affect landowners.

DCAL: Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

8. Mr McCarthy asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline her Department's role in the promotion of cohesion, sharing and integration. (AQO 1336/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department awaits publication of the Executive's finalised cohesion, sharing and integration (CSI) strategy. A cross-party working group was established in June 2011 and has been meeting on a weekly basis since September 2011 to achieve political consensus on the range of issues that will underpin a finalised strategy. The work plan of the group has been informed by the findings from the independent analysis of the comprehensive consultation exercise on the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration. The group

plans to finalise the strategy and high-level action plan in early 2012. In the interim, my Department continues to meet its statutory obligations under section 75 to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations between persons of different religious beliefs, political opinions or racial groups.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for her detailed response. However, will she tell the Assembly how her shared-out listing of two separate language strategies as building blocks instead of a fully comprehensive language strategy will contribute to the promotion of a CSI strategy that all people and parties in Northern Ireland can support?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Member may know, I am entitled under the St Andrews Agreement and amended Act to bring forward two separate strategies for languages. I am sorry that he feels that languages are an issue for CSI. I do not agree with him at all, if that is what the Member has said. In fact, I would almost say that it is a bit offensive, although I would suggest that the Member in his commitment to shared and better relations feels that the Department perhaps needs to look at areas of its work in anticipation that a CSI-approved strategy will come forward. I assure the Member, setting aside what I just said to him, that our Department is very aware and committed to meeting its section 75 duties.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her detailed and comprehensive report. How did DCAL contribute to the draft CSI strategy document?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is a cross-cutting strategy, and DCAL, like many other Departments, was asked to make a contribution during the development stages of the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration. My officials also held bilateral meetings with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister during that process to discuss our departmental response. Our policy refers to a consultation document in relation to our own work on cultural diversity, the community festivals fund, regional or minority languages strategy and the Sport Matters strategy.

Mr Nesbitt: Does the Minister think that an Irish language Act or a minority languages Act would be more likely to advance good relations?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I honestly do not see how it would not. I do not know what the issue is for

people around languages. It is certainly not something I would put in CSI, so I am not really too sure what the Member's point is. I believe, however, that advancing an Irish language Act, which I intend to bring forward proposals on, will be good for the people who need and are waiting for an Act. I do not believe for one minute that the Member is genuine with regard to his concern about language rights for people from the Irish language community.

Mr Eastwood: Does the Minister's Department take into account the promotion of cohesion, sharing and integration when making funding decisions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We take into consideration, through our arm's-length bodies, the promotion of section 75. The promotion of section 75 and meeting all its obligations is not a negotiable but an essential prerequisite to a funding application. In addition to what I outlined to my colleague Oliver McMullan around cultural diversity, the community festivals fund, languages and Sport Matters, all those areas are examples of where people have, for example, used sport, arts and culture as a way to develop and strengthen community and good relations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is not in his place for question 9.

Ulster Scots: Ministerial Advisory Group

10. **Mr Craig** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline the planned expenditure over the next three years for the ministerial advisory group on Ulster Scots. (AQO 1338/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The indicative allocation to the ministerial advisory group is just below £3 million during the period 2012–15. It is intended that that funding will go towards a variety of projects identified by the group. The ministerial advisory group was unable to spend its full allocation of £998,000 this financial year, given the time required to second suitable staff, develop business cases for proposed projects and secure necessary approvals. I have asked my officials to consider further steps to ensure that full spend is achieved during the 2012-15 financial years.

Mr Craig: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. I also thank her for the assurances given with regard to the

underspend. Will she also assure the House that there will be no duplication of funding by the Ulster-Scots Language Society and the ministerial advisory group, and will she ensure that what little funding there is for those cultural issues will be maximised?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can give the Member that assurance. I had a concern about that, too. I have been advised, not just by the Ulster-Scots Agency but through my meetings with the ministerial advisory group, that it is not double funding. Not only should there not be double funding, as the Member said, but the funding should be better used to achieve the needs in the community in a more strategic way. So far, I am convinced and confident that double funding will not happen.

In answer to the Member's question about the plans for 2012-15, I can say that the money was sent back on the basis that it had not been spent. I hope that that will not be the case again. I do not believe that handing money back to the Exchequer is good, and the communities that have good projects and are waiting for some support deserve a far better service than that.

Mrs Dobson: What is the current timescale for the delivery of an Ulster-Scots academy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is no timescale for the delivery of an Ulster-Scots academy.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member is not in his place to ask question 11.

Windsor Park

12. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure when the redevelopment of Windsor Park will be completed. (AQO 1340/11-15)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sport NI has been appointed the delivery agent for the programme and has been busy working closely with the IFA to take that project forward. As with any large capital build, timescales are reviewed constantly. However, I have made it clear that I expect public funding for that and other stadium projects to be expended by 31 March 2015. Its completion will, therefore, need to have regard to that timescale.

Mr Humphrey: Given that the new manager of the Northern Ireland football team has announced his first squad today, with the

return of former captain Aaron Hughes, and that we have the best supporters in Europe, as recognised by UEFA, does the Minister agree that now is a good time for everyone in Northern Ireland to get behind the Northern Ireland football team and its squad?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not know what that had to do with his original question. However, he has it on record anyway. Hopefully, given my diary commitments, I will be able to attend the next match.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra.

Given that today is a day for congratulations, I congratulate Derry man James McClean, who has been selected today to play for Ireland.

Will the Minister outline the funding for the other stadiums?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The funding for Casement Park was announced at the end of last week. The Ulster Council will develop its stadium project in Casement Park. That project will be subject to the same conditions, including that the money will be expended by 31 March 2015. I anticipate that Ravenhill will receive planning permission, and I expect developments from the IFA on soccer. That is a good news story for everybody, particularly those awaiting jobs, the construction industry and the sporting communities.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I was advised that questions 13 and 14 had been withdrawn. The Member is not in his place to ask question 15. As there are no further questions, I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes.

3.00 pm

Education

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have been advised that question 1 has been withdrawn and requires a written answer.

Irish-medium Schools

2. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of Education what growth there has been in the Irish-medium sector in the past 10 years and what is the projected growth. (AQO 1345/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd (The Minister of Education): Go raibh maith agat. Over the past 10 years, the number of children in funded Irish-medium education settings at preschool, primary and post-primary level has risen from 2,695 in 2002-03 to 4,392 in 2011-12. The figures for 2002-03 equate to 0.77% of all children in grant-aided schools and funded preschool education. The figure for 2011-12 equates to 1.33% of all children in grant-aided schools and funded preschool education. Pupil projection figures provided by Irish-medium primary and post-primary schools as part of the 2011 school census return project a growth from 2,999 pupils in 2011-12 to 3,207 in 2012-13.

I regard the growth of good-quality Irish-medium schools as extremely important. I will continue to support the growth of the sector within the context of area based plans, which are agreed by all sectors and approved by the Department.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for that answer. Given that growth, does he agree that there is a need to increase the availability of Irish-medium education — naíscoileanna, bunscoileanna, meánscoileanna, and after schools clubs — within a reasonable travel distance for parents across all the Six Counties?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, is the simple answer. It is one of the growth areas in education. You will have seen the fall in the overall general population of pupils attending school. However, within the Irish-medium sector we have actually seen marginal growth in parents wishing their children to access Irish-medium education. Therefore, there is an obligation on the Department to provide resources to parents for that. We are particularly keen to expand our meánscoileanna, or post-primary school, education across the North. Indeed, all the other sectors that you touched on will be examined. A number of development proposals are before my Department at this time and are under scrutiny. I will make an announcement about those in due course.

Mrs Hale: Will the Minister give his assessment of any detrimental effects on the Catholic maintained sector and schools in general arising from the viability criteria and funding arrangements for Irish-medium schools?

Mr O'Dowd: The Good Friday Agreement is in place and legislation is in place, and there is a demand from parents for Irish-medium

education. It is not a case of there being a detrimental effect on one or other sector. We have a duty, under all those pieces of legislation and the agreement, to provide Irish-medium education. The viability criteria are in place so that we can enhance the growth and promote the use of Irish-medium education.

I encourage as many Members as possible to visit their local Irish-medium schools, to talk to the teachers, the parents and the pupils and to experience what is going on. This is about young people, children, learning through the medium of Irish. They come from all backgrounds and all walks of life and all have different opinions on many different matters. I think that it would broaden the mind of many Members if they were to visit and engage with their local Irish-medium school, rather than relying on myself, or any other Minister, to relay what the experiences are in those schools.

Mr Kinahan: I like the idea of going to an Irish-medium school to find out what is going on. However, could the Minister detail how the annual expenditure on a child in the Irish-medium sector compares to that of the other three sectors?

Mr O'Dowd: I do not have the figures in front of me, but I can provide them to the Member. All funding arrangements, for any school sector, are open and transparent and available to Members of the Assembly or any other organisation that wishes to access that funding information.

Mrs McKevitt: Does the Minister believe that Irish-medium sector schools would benefit from the introduction of an Irish language Act?

Mr O'Dowd: I understand that my colleague the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure, who has just answered questions, is responsible for an Irish language Act. I will allow the Minister to respond in detail on her plans for an Irish language Act.

Irish-medium education is protected under legislation, and it is protected as a result of the negotiations and discussions that flowed from the Good Friday Agreement. So, there is a legislative basis upon which Irish-medium education is provided.

Preschool Admissions: Criteria

3. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Education whether the July/August birthdays

admissions criterion will be revoked in time for the preschool admissions process for the 2013-14 academic year. (AQO 1346/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The decision to remove the July/August birthday criterion from the priority criteria for preschool admissions is one of a number of actions that are outlined in the recent review of preschool admissions arrangements that was announced in January. As I indicated in my statement to the Assembly, the report is a framework for action. The removal of the priority criteria will require a legislative process. I will move as quickly as possible to remove the criteria from legislation.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his action. I hope that he will be able to do that before the booklet is produced in September for the following year. Given that the application process for 2012-13 is under way, could the Minister outline any steps that he is taking to ensure that extra funded places are being made available in areas where the education and library boards have identified pressures?

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is in discussions with the education and library boards on that very issue. We are aware of a number of geographical areas where there is a higher demand than expected for preschool education places, and we are now trying to assess how we meet that demand.

Mrs Dobson: Can the Minister give an indication of how many young children will be directly affected by his decision to change the July/August birthday admission criterion?

Mr O'Dowd: Let me assure parents that the change to the July/August birthday criterion is not intended to discriminate against anyone or to prevent young people in that age band from accessing school. Several different reports have identified that priority criterion as causing disadvantage to other pupils. Therefore, it is not a case of my wishing to exclude anyone from preschool settings. I want to open up preschool settings to as many children as possible. I do not have the exact figures to hand for the number of pupils who accessed preschool last year on the basis of the July/August birthday admission criterion, but I will ask my officials to forward those figures to the Member.

Mr McDevitt: Does the Minister concede that all best international practice and evidence points to the need to be able to give a statutory

guarantee to every child who is 3 years of age that they will have a right to a preschool or nursery school place? Can he tell us when he will bring such proposals to the House?

Mr O'Dowd: Is the Member suggesting that all best standards are not being practised by not having such a statutory obligation? I have no evidence that that is the case. We have conducted a thorough review of preschool education, and we will move forward now to ensure that all parents who want their children to attend preschool will have places available to them. That is a commitment that not only comes from my Department but is in the Programme for Government. So, that right will exist and will be actioned. The Member has never brought to my attention in any debate that I have had with him the international best practice, report or study to which he refers that states that placing this on a statutory basis would improve the rights of any parent or child. We are now focused on ensuring that places are available for all parents who want their children to have preschool education.

Minister for Education and Skills

4. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the work that he is undertaking with the Minister for Education and Skills in Dublin. (AQO 1347/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: I am working closely with the Minister for Education and Skills on a wide range of issues of mutual interest and benefit. We co-operate on several fronts through the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC). Recently, the joint educational underachievement working group has focused on the sharing of good practice in literacy and numeracy. The working group on teacher qualifications has sought to remove barriers to the professional recognition and registration of teachers in both jurisdictions. It has also developed programmes to share best practice across the sectors. A multi-annual plan for the Middletown Centre for Autism that will be deliverable within the financial constraints of both Departments is being developed jointly. Proposals on the way forward will be put forward for Minister Quinn and I to consider at our next NSMC meeting at the end of May 2012.

In the context of an ongoing joint study of North/South education co-operation, Ministers agreed at the most recent NSMC meeting, which

was held on 1 February, to proceed with a joint survey to inform cross-border pupil movement and school planning. Minister Quinn and I agreed on the importance of facilitating parental preference for school attendance, irrespective of where the parents' preferred school is located. This survey will inform that discussion by establishing the potential demand for cross-border schooling. I hope that, when the survey takes place later this year, it will generate widespread participation.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. What is his Department's assessment of the need for enhanced North/South co-operation on school enrolments and the planning of the schools estate, specifically for rural communities along the border corridor?

Mr O'Dowd: There has been a recent focus across the political parties on the need to secure education for young people in the rural corridors on either side of the border. I intend to play my part in that. The survey that we will issue later this year will identify how much demand there is among parents and pupils and how the Administrations should meet that demand. The survey will involve a written questionnaire focusing on the population in the border corridor for whom school choice is a topical issue. If possible, the option of an online survey will be included. An estimated 30,000 to 50,000 households will be involved, and all practical means of communication will be explored and implemented to ensure a high return. That survey should be completed and options appraisals prepared for the attention of Minister Quinn and me by the time of the first North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting of 2013. We will progress the work and meet the demand identified in the survey.

Mr Byrne: Will the Minister have any discussions with the Education Minister in the Republic, Mr Quinn, that centre on the curriculum? The Minister will be aware that the common curriculum in Northern Ireland involves GCSEs and A levels, whereas the Republic has a more general curriculum that is similar to the Scottish model and involves junior certificates and leaving certificates. How does the Minister propose to work on that?

Mr O'Dowd: Work is ongoing on the recognition of qualifications on either side of the border. As I think that our current curriculum delivers for the needs of young people locally, I have no plans to change it. However, we want to ensure that we have a common understanding and recognition of qualifications.

One of the issues that has caused some concern was the mixed reception thus far of a number of universities in the South to the A* qualification. I discussed that issue with Minister Quinn, and I am glad to say that discussions are continuing between my departmental officials and Minister Quinn's officials. We hope to be able to issue a joint response in the near future. However, that matter rests largely with the universities across the border and depends on the response of the Irish Universities Association. I hope that, if Mr Quinn and I can agree on the matter, the universities will also agree.

Mr Storey: Minister, have you had any discussions with the Minister in the Irish Republic on special educational needs, other than on the provision of the centre in Middletown? In a debate in the Irish Republic on 11 September, your party was extremely critical of the Education Minister in the Republic, especially on the issue of special educational needs provision and the increase in the pupil:teacher ratio there. Sinn Féin cannot have it both ways. It cannot be critical of what is happening in the Irish Republic —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member please finish his question?

Mr Storey: It cannot be critical of what is happening in the Irish Republic and do exactly the same thing. When will the Minister act in the best interests of the children in Northern Ireland and stop chasing moonbeams, especially the one in Middletown?

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Member's detailed interest in debates in the Dáil, particularly his interest in Sinn Féin contributions. It is always good for people to broaden their minds and horizons.

Mr Storey: They were in English.

Mr O'Dowd: Whatever language they were in, that is a welcome fact.

It is not appropriate for me, at this Dispatch Box, to get involved in the debate about how the

Dublin Government fund education. However, we have ring-fenced funding for special educational needs in this jurisdiction and have not made cuts in that area. The money is there, and it has been secured.

3.15 pm

The Member well knows that, working with the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we have invested more money in the overall education budget in this jurisdiction. We are not involved in a penny-pinching programme against the most vulnerable in our society. We face very difficult issues as a direct result of the £4 billion that the British Government have taken away from our Budget, but those are matters that the Executive continue to study, and they will decide how to deal with them.

I can assure the Member that we are not chasing moonbeams when it comes to Middletown or any other matter. I have said that a report is being prepared on Middletown by both Departments, which will be put before the next North/South Ministerial Council meeting in education sectoral format in May. We will make a decision on the way forward for Middletown on that occasion.

Maghera High School Site

5. **Mr I McCrea** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the expressions of interest in the former Maghera High School. (AQO 1348/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Expressions of interest in the former Maghera High School site were received from Magherafelt District Council, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta and Largentogher enterprise group. Magherafelt District Council subsequently withdrew its interest in the site. All options for potential future education use of the site are being explored by the North Eastern Education and Library Board in conjunction with my Department.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister highlighted those that have an interest. Is he aware that a decision is required on this matter because of outside interests from the private sector? If he decides to consider one of the options in front of him, will he advise the House as to who will pick up the tab for the purchase of the site, and

will he ensure that any decision is made without any political bias?

Mr O'Dowd: The decision on the use of the site will be driven by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) guidelines on the disposal of public assets and by the needs of education, if it is to be an education site, in the Maghera area. I am not going to discuss any private interest that there may be in the site, because, obviously, there are commercial interests, and I am not involved in any of those discussions. There is a stated way forward for such matters and I will leave it up to my departmental officials and the North Eastern Education Library Board to deal with the situation, as I would when disposing of any other asset.

Mrs Overend: Will the Minister give some details on the process? Is it his intention to consult on the proposals that have been put forward for the use of the former Maghera High School site to ensure the best use of the building and take into consideration the thoughts and feelings of the people in that area and the local education and library board? If so, how will he go about doing that?

Mr O'Dowd: As I said to the Member who spoke previously, we will follow the DFP and Land and Property Services published guidance on the disposal of surplus public sector property, which advises that surplus property must either be transferred within the public sector at market prices or put on the open market with the least possible delay. It is considered good practice to keep former site owners apprised of the disposal process concerning their former property because they may have a statutory right to have the land offered back to them in specific circumstances. I will ensure that the guidance on the disposal of the site will be followed. If it allows for consultation with key stakeholders, such as the surrounding community or the education and library board, that consultation will take place.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister outline what the potential savings would be to the ratepayers where existing and unused quality buildings can accommodate the growth of the Irish-medium sector rather than spending money on newbuilds? Will he confirm whether a development proposal has been published in relation to Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta's plan to establish a school at the site in question?

Mr O'Dowd: It is only wise and prudent that we use our existing schools estate to develop education, and that, where high-quality vacant buildings exist, they are used for the best purpose. There will clearly be significant savings if we can utilise existing sites for the development of any sector, including the Irish-medium sector. I am aware that an Irish-medium development proposal for the Maghera area is to be published, although, at this stage, I do not need to be aware of whether it has been published yet. However, I will treat that proposal as I would any other, and I will go through the stated criteria to do so.

North Eastern Education and Library Board: Youth Services

6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Education what guidelines are in place to ensure that children with additional needs or learning difficulties in the North Eastern Education and Library Board area can participate in mainstream youth provision. (AQO 1349/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Youth provision in the North Eastern Education and Library Board (NEELB) area is a matter for the NEELB. The NEELB is subject to the duties imposed on public authorities under section 75. The NEELB has advised that it is fully committed to providing appropriate services for all young people in its area and operates a policy of inclusion, drawn up in partnership with Mencap, for young people who have additional needs or learning difficulties.

For the majority of young people, additional support requirements are assessed and met by local youth groups without the involvement of the board. Where such requirements cannot be met locally, board officers are available to provide advice and support with assessments and discuss additional support available from the board. Such support may include an additional paid leader to support young people with learning disabilities to integrate into mainstream youth provision.

The board provides training for workers and volunteers on equality and inclusive youth work practices, including workshops/awareness sessions on a range of specific learning difficulties and disabilities. Board officers also regularly visit larger groups to discuss their inclusion practices, including engagement with,

and programmes for, young people who have additional needs or learning difficulties.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will any additional resource be made available for youth services, specifically those involving special needs, as a result of the ongoing special educational needs (SEN) review?

Mr O'Dowd: Youth services are an integral part of our education service delivery. As part of the SEN review, we will examine how we ensure that youth services are delivered in a fair and equitable manner to all our young people, including young people with special educational needs. We have a duty of care and a responsibility to all young people. I want to ensure that all the Department's bodies, whether the education boards now or the Education and Skills Authority in the future, look after the needs of young people with SEN.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister give an update on his Department's priorities for youth strategy?

Mr O'Dowd: My officials are drawing up a draft priorities for youth strategy. I will study that document closely, and it will then go out to consultation. As I said, youth services are an integral part of education. We want to ensure that our youth services are delivered to assist and promote education in a different and less formal setting. We want to ensure that we use our youth services to improve and enhance young people's life opportunities.

Mr Durkan: What training is in place for teachers for teaching children with autism in mainstream schools?

Mr O'Dowd: There are a number of training opportunities for teachers for dealing with young people with additional or special educational needs. I will forward details to the Member. Under the SEN review, we want to ensure that we have in place a training and career enhancement package that allows teachers to be there at early identification of the special educational needs of young people. Where appropriate, they are the focus of how we assist and improve the lives of young people with SEN, whether it is autism or another form of special educational need.

Mr Agnew: Given the changes to the way in which the posts of classroom assistants for those with special educational needs are

funded, will the Minister guarantee that the service will remain universal?

Mr O'Dowd: One reason why we introduced the SEN review was to ensure that we have universal provision across the North. Therefore, I am not sure what point the Member is making about the change in funding for classroom assistants. The proposal on the way forward for special educational needs is that the service is universal across the North and that we do not have a patchwork quilt of services delivered in different board areas or different schools. The criteria will be that the services meet the needs of the child, which is the important thing.

Special Educational Needs

7. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister of Education why he is changing the system currently in place for children with special educational needs. (AQO 1350/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: The Department of Education undertook a review of special educational needs and inclusion that resulted in a formal consultation on proposals contained in 'Every School a Good School – The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'. The review was essentially undertaken to address the well-documented issues with the current framework that had arisen over time. The main reasons for the review were the inconsistencies and delays in assessment and provision across the education and library board areas, the large numbers of special needs children being educated in mainstream schools who required their needs to be met and the high level of bureaucracy associated with the current framework.

There have been large increases in the numbers of children with SEN, statements and significant needs; those children now make up around 20% of our school population. That is a very different position from that which existed when the system of statements was first introduced in 1986. Those factors combined have put mounting pressures on the pupils concerned, their parents, teachers, schools and boards of governors.

I am progressing with changes to the current system to ensure that we provide a more equitable framework that will meet the needs of all children with SEN across all our schools. I want all schools to have the capacity to

identify and assess a child's learning needs and to ensure that interventions are put in place as early as possible in order to enable every child to progress and to reach his or her individual potential. I also want to ensure that each education and library board, and in time, the Education and Skills Authority, is able to provide training and support for schools and interventions for pupils in a much more timely and responsive way than at present.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is important to make sure that the parents of children with special needs are kept fully informed of what is going on and have some input into the final outcome?

Mr O'Dowd: I fully agree with the Member. There has been quite a lengthy consultation process, and rightly so. There were nearly 3,000 responses to the original consultation. In recent times, I have set out for the Education Committee and the public my broad proposals on the way forward. There has been further consultation with key stakeholders in the meantime. In the not-too-distant future, I want to set out what I believe is the best way forward for the provision of SEN in our communities. Any significant changes, be they to legislation or to policy direction, will require further consultation. If legislative change is, indeed, necessary, the required legislation will have to go through the House and the consultative process that all legislation has to go through. None of that will be done away from the glare of public attention, and rightly so. I want to ensure that parents, educators and young people with special educational needs are continually kept informed of any planned changes.

Mr Nesbitt: Can the Minister say how many children who are currently statemented are likely to lose that status under the review?

Mr O'Dowd: No, and I think that it would be wrong for anybody to get involved in guesstimates around that. The needs of each and every child will be assessed and the best programme of work for that child will be put in place. In some instances, that work will be referred to as a co-ordinated support plan, and in other instances, it will be referred to as a personal learning plan, both of which will have a legislative basis and legislative protection.

I am sure that Members can recall many instances in their constituency office where

parents said that they were frustrated at either the delay in the statementing process or the outcomes of it. Let us not let ourselves get too anxious about statementing. The outcomes for the child are the important thing. Parents' concerns appear to stem from the fact that they want to ensure that there is a legislative basis for such matters, and I assure them that there will be a legislative basis and legislative protection for their children.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister feel that recent media reports have misrepresented the changes he is making to the special educational needs framework?

Mr O'Dowd: I can fully understand why parents became exasperated and, indeed, in some cases, quite angry when they heard headlines such as, "Department of Education to scrap statementing". Any parent who has been through the process to achieve a statement will be, quite rightly, very protective of that statementing outcome. We are not here to scrap the rights of any vulnerable children. We are here to protect those rights. Through the new process, I can guarantee that, be it through a co-ordinated support plan or a personal learning plan, children's entitlements and rights will be protected under the law.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes Question Time for today. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments, please.

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

3.30 pm

Private Members' Business

Welfare Reform

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly believes that the coalition Government's welfare cuts and major aspects of their welfare reform agenda are having and will continue to have a significant detrimental impact on our community; recognises that the impact will be more severe for Northern Ireland given our historically high levels of disadvantage and our higher proportions of families with children and people in receipt of disability living allowance; notes that the accumulated cost of welfare cuts to the local economy could reach £450m; and calls on the Executive to make opposition to a wide range of the welfare reforms their highest priority and to immediately pursue robust negotiations with the coalition Government to pursue all possible legal and operational flexibilities and financial support to mitigate the impact of the welfare cuts and changes imposed on Northern Ireland. — [Mr Durkan.]

Which amendment was:

Amendment No 1: Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert

"reaffirms its unanimous support for welfare reforms that are aimed at simplifying the social security process and helping people to get back to work; notes with concern the negative impact that many of the coalition Government's proposed welfare reforms could have on vulnerable people in Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister for Social Development to continue his robust engagement with the coalition Government and to work with Executive colleagues via the Executive subgroup on welfare reform to pursue, where possible, measures to mitigate the negative impacts of the proposed welfare reforms on Northern Ireland." — [Mr Easton.]

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I beg to move amendment No 2: After "impact on our community" insert

"and, given the British Government's record of rejecting all proposed changes, even those championed by their own second Chamber, calls on all parties to defend the objectives of the Programme for Government and use the powers of this institution to protect our most vulnerable citizens".

What we have heard so far is fairly predictable, and I am sure that Members will also consider what I am going to say to be fairly predictable. I will start by putting into context the ethos of the welfare state, what it was about and what it should be about. Paragraph 27 of the Beveridge report states:

“Social insurance should aim at guaranteeing the minimum income needed for subsistence... determination of what is required for reasonable human subsistence is to some extent a matter of judgment; estimates on this point change with time, and generally, in a progressive community, change upwards.”

Today, the concept of welfare as a right is being eroded. The collective security that welfare provides is being portrayed as a burden on society and, frequently, those in receipt of benefits are being portrayed as undeserving. This British Government are seeking to create a divide between those in work and those out of work, arguing that it is unfair on those in work to pay for those out of work. The welfare state was founded on the collective principle of social insurance where everyone contributes to a system that insures everyone against poverty. What could be fairer than that?

The current British Government are attacking the welfare system by cutting £18 billion from welfare while giving away more than £25 billion in corporate tax breaks over the same period. They are emphasising the costs of fraud while turning a blind eye to £120 billion of tax lost through erosion, evasion, avoidance and non-collection. The attacks on welfare are not just financial; welfare is being vilified in a propaganda campaign that suggests that welfare is too generous, that claimants are lazy and fraudulent and that public servants are not fit to run welfare services. The real scandal with welfare is not people receiving what they are not entitled to but people not receiving what they are entitled to. For example, approximately £1.9 million in pension credit is unclaimed weekly here in the North.

Low pay is endemic in many sectors of the economy, including catering, cleaning and caring, so it makes sense to focus efforts on ensuring that work pays through tackling low pay. The role of benefits to the disabled and those suffering ill health has changed dramatically over time as social attitudes have changed. The demonisation — a word that the Minister objected to — of those on benefits has become

commonplace, but no area of welfare has been subjected to such vitriol as those on disability benefits. The first move of the British coalition Government was to attack disability benefits with reassessments for those on ESA and DLA. Seventy-six thousand people on incapacity benefit are being migrated to jobseekers' allowance. There have been all sorts of attacks of those in receipt of DLA, yet official government figures indicate that DLA is the least fraudulent of benefits at less than 0.5% lost through fraud. Even the architect of the new ESA system, Professor Paul Gregg, admits in relation to the work capability assessment:

“The test is badly malfunctioning. The current assessment is a complete mess.”

Disabled people continue to remain among the poorest members of society. There is a need for the flawed, privatised assessment programme to be abandoned, and there should be a return to a system of assessment by NHS staff and GPs. DLA needs to be supported to allow more disabled people to lead independent lives. We also need to make a determined effort to tackle child poverty by removing the causes of adult poverty.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for giving way. We are receiving reports from this morning's Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have raised this matter directly with the British Government and representatives from all of the other devolved institutions. Agreement has been reached that there will be a substantive discussion at the next JMC meeting on the issue of welfare reform. Does the Member welcome that as a very important message to be given out? Clearly, all the contributors to the debate so far have acknowledged that there are fundamental problems with the current welfare reform agenda that is being pursued by the British Government.

Mr Brady: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I welcome what he said. This type of discussion will focus the minds of all parties in the Assembly, and surely the purpose of the debate is to ensure that we are all pulling in the same direction.

We need to make a determined effort to tackle child poverty by removing the causes of adult poverty, such as low pay and low benefit levels. There is also a need for publicly funded childcare to allow parents to work and study and to

support and encourage children's development. The official poverty line is £170 a week, and the basic state pension is £102 a week. According to the projected figures for universal credit, it will become £145, which is still well short of the poverty line. Society has changed in many ways since the Beveridge report, and there have been major changes in social attitudes, household composition, etc. However, some things are timeless: unemployment, retirement, disability and illness remain major causes of poverty and affect everyone.

What is required is a welfare state that allows everyone to have a decent standard of living free from poverty; a Government that commit to full employment; and a welfare system based on need and not on moral judgements. There is also a need to end the low pay that leaves people dependent on means-tested benefits. Finally, it is the mark of a civilised society to support people when they are in need, whether they are ill, disabled or unemployed. Welfare is there to provide a decent existence, and it is incumbent on all parties in this institution to protect those most vulnerable and in need in our society.

I will welcome the Minister's statements if he commits — I know that he has committed to some degree — to mitigating the most serious impacts that welfare reform will have on the most vulnerable in our society. We need to focus on that because, too often — I have tried to bring this out — people are vilified for no good reason. We need to get our acts right in how we project the image of the Assembly in protecting and representing people, and we are doing our best to make sure that they are not affected by these draconian and, some might say, serious cuts to the standard of living that people enjoy. I have never met anybody who said, "I love living on benefit". It does not happen. Some people may have been caught up in that lifestyle, but it is out of necessity, not choice. That needs to be taken on board.

Mr Copeland: I welcome the opportunity, if that is the right word, to speak on this matter, which, as we know, will probably figure in and perhaps dominate, justifiably, this entire Assembly term.

No one in this Chamber who is possessed of an ounce of compassion or understanding will doubt how wide-ranging the changes that are proposed in the Welfare Reform Bill are. So far, this House has had to vote on welfare

change on a couple of instances, and, at this stage, I would appreciate from the Minister, who is listening as always, a reaffirmation of his undertaking to examine the mitigatory measures that he spoke of when we last discussed the changes to the shared room rate.

Reform to the United Kingdom's welfare system is badly needed, whether we are in favour of it or not. It has been in place for quite a long time. When Tony Blair came to power with the last Labour Government, no note was found in the Treasury saying that there was no money left. However, millions of people were on benefit. When Mr Blair left after a 10-year period of economic growth and prosperity for some, millions of people were still on benefit. If there was ever a sign that something was not working, it was that.

I am sure that all of us who have ever worked in trying to guide a citizen through the minefield that the benefits system in Northern Ireland has become will agree that the system needs to change. It is too complex and unwieldy. There are too many benefits, with too many different criteria, leading to much confusion among people who are not best equipped to understand forms or deal with the conclusion.

Doing nothing is not an option, as inaction will only make things worse in future as welfare expenditure starts to cripple our public spending, which, left unaddressed, it undoubtedly will. Therefore, the stated goal of universal credit is understandable. It is to simplify a system that is at present unfit for purpose, to acknowledge and help those who require help, and to remove the likelihood of someone who does not deserve to receive a benefit receiving it.

At the moment, for some people who find themselves reliant on benefits, the benefits of returning to work can be extremely low. In the current system, many who move from welfare to employment — should they be lucky enough to find employment — find all or almost all their earnings deducted from their benefits. People are simply not prepared to take the risk. Who in this Chamber would stand in judgement of them for holding those things in the balance, especially if it impacts on their families and, more particularly, their children?

That failing is not simply penalising the recipients by limiting their opportunities, such as they are; it can also be seen as having a

knock-on effect on the social and economic impacts across the United Kingdom. Young people growing up in jobless households are much more likely to struggle to find stable employment. The fact that Northern Ireland has spent more on welfare payments than on the provision of health and social care should, at the very least, raise fundamental questions about the viability of the system. However, we must never forget that it is people's lives that we are talking about. It is not right to think purely about employed and unemployed; it will have just as much impact on people with disabilities or those with families receiving housing benefit.

To the SDLP's credit, the motion rightly points out that many of the proposed reforms will have a disproportionate effect in Northern Ireland. I do not think that that is purely because the coalition Government are deliberately targeting the Province; it is because many of the biggest factors of benefit dependency are, unfortunately, rife here. Northern Ireland suffers from a high claimant count and the highest level of economic inactivity in the United Kingdom.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close please.

Mr Copeland: There are also significant mental health difficulties compounded by 30 years of politically motivated murder and unspeakable violence. Latest figures suggest that there are over 50,000 men and women here who are incapable of work.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Mrs Cochrane: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion and the amendments. No one can fail to be aware of the potential impact of welfare reform in Northern Ireland. Although the Alliance Party is supportive of reforming the welfare system to incentivise people to work where possible and to enable those caught in the benefits trap to gain skills and to contribute positively to society, we do have serious concerns with the Welfare Reform Bill in its current form. Bluntly put, you have to be able to get a job or have the opportunity to increase your working hours for the current proposals to mean anything other than simply punishing the poor.

Others have already touched on the detrimental effects that the proposed welfare reforms will have in Northern Ireland, and I would like to draw attention to a few of those. Northern

Ireland is one of the poorest regions in the UK, with historically high levels of disadvantage. In addition, we have a significantly higher proportion of people likely to be affected by the stricter medical test for claiming the new disability benefit, with over twice as many claimants per thousand here than in England. We also have a larger proportion of households with children, who, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies research has shown, comprise the group that will lose most as a percentage of income from the proposed changes.

There are also serious issues with the new universal credit; for example, the proposal that it is to be paid monthly to claimants in order to prepare them for working life. That could be catastrophic for vulnerable tenants who have never had to budget on a monthly basis and could end up in a much worse situation by being a month in arrears instead of a week. Similarly, over 133,000 people in Northern Ireland have a direct payment set up with their landlord, which ensures that their accommodation is never in jeopardy and helps to reduce the risk of personal debt. I see no benefit in disallowing tenants the choice to have their benefits paid directly to their landlord to protect their tenancy. Not only does direct payment benefit the tenant, but the financial security for social landlords that comes with that has been critical to their ability to secure private investment at highly competitive rates, thereby maximising their capacity to deliver much-needed, affordable homes to the taxpayer.

3.45 pm

A recent report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that universal credit will strengthen the incentive for single individuals to do low-paid work and will particularly strengthen the incentive for couples to have one person in work rather than none. However, the report goes on to say that universal credit will weaken the incentive for both to work rather than just one, which clearly goes against the original intention.

Furthermore, I do not see universal credit as a simplification of the benefits system. It may have one label, but there are umpteen different tests and barriers depending on the basis of the claim.

We need to be realistic, and I agree that we should call on the Executive to determine through their subgroup on welfare reform what limited movement we have to try to alleviate

the negative impact that welfare reform could have, perhaps with regard to discretionary housing payments and the social fund. Indeed, if those were the “powers of this institution” to which the amendment proposed by Sinn Féin refers, we could support it. However, if it is a suggestion that we break parity, that would be more difficult.

My colleague in Westminster, Naomi Long, has voted against the Welfare Reform Bill at every stage. Unfortunately, however, it appears that, if the argument is not won in Westminster, breaking parity in the Assembly is unlikely to be financially feasible. I agree that we need to negotiate robustly with the coalition Government.

The motion refers to making the opposition to welfare reforms the Executive’s “highest priority”. Is the SDLP seriously suggesting that jobs and skills be put on the back-burner? Surely that is the area that we need to focus on. I am sure that it will come as no surprise to Members that I think that our top priority should be creating a shared future. That would deliver efficiency, tackle deprivation, aid growth and build a strong economy that would ultimately deal more effectively with those dependent on welfare and the most vulnerable.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I want to speak up for young people, as well as families, the sick and those who are disabled. Welfare reform has adverse consequences for the most disadvantaged and vulnerable young people. Unemployment among young people is at a record high. Part of that has been driven by the global economic downturn, but it has also been driven by the policy of the Tory-led Government, who are determined to address their deficit by cutting back rather than by supporting growth. Against that background, it is particularly unhelpful to start treating those whose hopes and aspirations are being thwarted as feckless and irresponsible. However, I suppose that that is the assumption that underpins the British Government’s work programme.

Their welfare reform, or cuts, forces young people on jobseeker’s allowance to work for their benefit. Perhaps, some in the Chamber think that that can be no bad thing, and they, like the British Prime Minister, choose to pretend that youth unemployment has something to do with an inability to get out of

bed in the morning, rather than admit that there is a real lack of job opportunities.

I am here to say that our young people deserve better. They deserve real training, value-added placements and a fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work. Unlike other initiatives designed to tackle youth unemployment, the work experience programme is predicated on coercion and sanction. The Government can dress it up in whatever fashion they want, but young people will face sanctions if they chose not to go on those placements. That policy has led to serious concerns about a breach of human rights legislation, and my understanding is that a legal challenge is under way on that very issue.

Ethical concerns about the programme recently led to a number of high-profile companies, which had been participating, pulling out. Sainsbury’s and Waterstones were among some of the first to raise ethical concerns, followed by TK Maxx and Matalan, and Poundland is considering its position. TK Maxx has said that it does not support compulsory, non-paid work experience. Charities such as Marie Curie Cancer Care have also withdrawn from the work programme on ethical grounds.

Not only are there serious ethical considerations, but there is also no evidence to suggest that the working-for-benefit programme acts as a pathway to work. The first set of statistics show that, since the scheme was introduced in Britain in May 2011, over 24,000 people have undertaken unpaid work under the mandatory work programme without any significant impact on the number unemployed. It is incumbent on the Assembly to want better and to do better for our young people. Unemployment among young people is not the only issue that is badly served by welfare reform. Changes in housing benefit will also impact adversely on young homeless people.

At my suggestion, the Committee for Social Development brought a prayer of annulment to the Assembly last year to challenge changes in the eligibility for single occupancy housing benefit. Sinn Féin spoke in that debate and highlighted the hardship that a single change in eligibility would create for 6,000 young people under the age of 35 already living in one-bedroom flats and facing a 50% reduction in housing benefit. The red herring of an increase in discretionary payments to help those affected needs to be nailed. It is difficult to get

discretionary payments, and they last for only 13 weeks. Therefore, even if you are lucky to get those payments, it just suspends the inevitable, which is that you will have to top up your top-up.

At the time, MLAs did not endorse the Committee's concerns, but I hope that the Assembly might take the time to think again. We can dress it up in whatever fashion we like, but the facts are that welfare reform — it should be labelled welfare cuts — will have a devastating impact on many thousands of our constituents with benefit reductions. It also has the potential to make thousands of people homeless.

The future is bleak for those who are most in need in society. We have a responsibility to ensure that we are not found wanting in our efforts to lessen the impact that those cuts will have on communities.

Mr Beggs: I support the amendment in the name of Simon Hamilton and others. It is recognised that we need to reform our welfare system. The current system is not working, and I strongly believe that the payment of social security should incentivise and support people back into work, not penalise them on occasions for their efforts.

The present system and the current taxation system is so complicated that many people genuinely cannot work out whether it is worth their while gaining employment or working a few hours more because they could end up worse off.

In a related matter, I wish to put on record that I support the raising of the tax-free allowance so that people who earn less can take home more, and more people will see the benefits and advantages of working.

A fair weekly income is vital, but the issue is about much more than just a weekly income. Long-term welfare dependency can have serious adverse health effects on individuals. Their life expectancy is considerably lower, and it is important for the next generation to have a working role model in a household so that others are encouraged and see the benefits of striving, working, holding down a job and doing better for themselves.

Mr McGlone: Thanks very much to the Member for giving way. Will he accept that it is not only people who are exclusively on social security benefits who will be affected by the changes but families who are in receipt of working

tax credits? Some changes could lead to a reduction of as much as £4,000 a year for those families.

Mr Beggs: I fully accept that we have a complicated system of benefits and tax, which is bureaucratic and unclear, and we must create a system in which everyone knows that they are better off working. There have been failures in establishing the system that we have to date, and we must improve it. We must also protect and assist people who have disabilities.

Welfare reform must work in tandem with revitalising our economy, improving our education system and increasing early intervention so that opportunities will exist for all. We need a simpler system. At present, short-term employment can on occasions create difficulties for people, because the complexity of taking a job for a short time completely messes up their benefits and the money coming into a household, and it does not make sense to them to take up short-term employment. Therefore, it is important that we have a system that works and rewards people who decide to take on a few weeks' or months' work, which, hopefully, will lead to long-term work.

We have to acknowledge that welfare reform will have a very significant effect in Northern Ireland, because so many people have not worked for long periods and many are claiming income support. Furthermore, very large numbers are claiming unemployment benefit. That number rose to 61,500 last month, growing from 25,000 in 2006. Therefore, there are huge challenges. However, we must continue to try to encourage people and provide them with worthwhile opportunities to gain experience and to establish regular patterns of behaviour that help them to hold down long-term employment.

Some 14% of children in Northern Ireland are living in workless households. It is not good for children to live in that environment. We must create opportunities and more positive role models so that they can strive to improve.

There are changes coming in DLA, with the personal independence payments. I accept that there are huge concerns there, and I, too, have concerns. The vulnerable must be protected. However, I have a question regarding DLA. I have been aware of this issue for some time, but it has come to the public domain in recent times. Someone who is an alcoholic gets DLA. Is that person being helped or is their addiction

being fed? Those questions must be asked. Our benefit system should be looking at how we can better assist such people by protecting and helping them, rather than simply feeding their addiction, which, on many occasions, makes the situation worse.

We need to alter what happens at present with social housing. Many families live in overcrowded conditions, as there are insufficient houses available for them to move to. However, other households may have changed, with family members having moved on, and there might be many vacant bedrooms in those homes. So I think it is right that we move towards changing, so that those who are living in overcrowded conditions can be accommodated. That is appropriate.

It is important that housing benefit does not become a barrier to taking up employment and that the benefit trap that can exist is overcome. I know that many who start working for the first time cannot afford to have their own home. If they join with some friends to have a joint tenancy somewhere and to live independently —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr Beggs: — surely they should not be disadvantaged, compared with someone who is reliant on benefits. There is a need for change, but we cannot afford to breach parity. Otherwise, it will be taken from our block grant.

Dr McDonnell: The Welfare Reform Bill is a “tsunami of cuts” and “a recipe for deprivation”. Those are not my words, but the words of Professor Eileen Evason, who is a respected expert and broadcaster on welfare matters. She made those comments when she addressed a conference that we held recently on welfare reform.

The SDLP is not in the business of scaremongering, as some have tried to accuse us. We are in the business of doing all that we can to protect hardworking families, the poor, the sick and those with disabilities. We recognise the need for a reform of the system, and we accept that, at times, it is abused by a very tiny minority of people. Abuse cannot be tolerated and should not be allowed to continue, but the answer is not to take a blunderbuss approach, such as the Tory-concocted legislation that is going through the House of Commons.

The Bill will not lift people out of poverty, and it will not lift people into work, as the Tories and the ‘Daily Mail’ would have us believe. The truth is that it will demoralise already vulnerable people, and push them further into poverty and deprivation and out to the margins of society.

In the past few days, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has demonstrated that a family with two children will be £580 a year worse off, and a couple with no children will be £100 a year worse off, as a result of changes in the child and working tax credit system.

As other Members have pointed out, women, children and those living with disability in Northern Ireland will be hardest hit.

4.00 pm

The issue that we face in the Bill, with its raft of welfare cuts, is that it does not offer a solution based on an analysis of any of the problems associated with the current social security system and economic environment. It is a package of cuts wrapped up in a populist “Make work pay” banner. Even that superficial mantra is flawed; to make work pay, there must be quality, decent paying jobs around. The SDLP is all about getting people back into work for the financial benefit, personal development and satisfaction it might bring them, but, as the recent unemployment figures from the Office for National Statistics show, the jobs are not out there for people at this time.

My limited time inhibits me from fully analysing all the flaws of the Bill. Others have highlighted the impact on mothers, especially those with babies, the impact on families, on those living with disability and on those with long-term serious illness. I would like to focus briefly on the economic impact of the welfare cuts on Northern Ireland as a whole because they are wide-ranging. The cuts, taking into account inflation, will take some £450 million out of local purses and wallets, which means that that £450 million will be taken out of local retail tills. As we have discussed many times in the House, retailers and traders in towns, villages and cities across Northern Ireland are struggling to keep their doors open at the moment. The economic consequences do not end there. The cuts will detrimentally impact the number of business start-ups, a key objective of our Executive. It will be assumed under the new rules that an entrepreneur starting up a business is earning the national minimum wage and is therefore

precluded from any entitlement to benefits while they try to get established. Starting up a business is initially costly and risky. Removing the safety net will act as a barrier to new business start-ups and entrepreneurs. I therefore appeal to our Executive, if they are serious and sincere about rebalancing our economy, supporting entrepreneurs, supporting SMEs —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close, please.

Dr McDonnell: — eradicating child poverty and protecting the vulnerable in our society, to rigorously pursue every avenue of protection for Northern Ireland that they can in the Bill.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I welcome the opportunity to address the Assembly on the proposed welfare reforms and particularly to consider the issues highlighted in the motion and to outline how I see welfare reform being implemented in Northern Ireland. To put things in context, I advise Members that, as of this morning, the Welfare Reform Bill at Westminster had not completed its legislative passage and is now expected to gain Royal Assent by mid-March.

Members will be aware that the Welfare Reform Bill represents radical change to the existing welfare state. The changes are required for different reasons. The system has become increasingly complex both for people trying to claim benefits and for those who administer them. The system has evolved into something that it was never intended to become, and it acts as a disincentive for individuals to take up paid work. Thirdly, the system is not financially sustainable because costs have escalated significantly in the past decade. In bringing forward the Welfare Reform Bill, the coalition Government committed to reducing the complexity of the benefits system and to ensuring that it promotes personal responsibility and encourages those who can work to do so; supports vulnerable individuals who are unable to work; ensures that the system is fair both to those in work and those on benefits; and ensures that no individual is consigned to a life on benefits and that it always pays to work. That brief synopsis represents the basis for welfare reform. While we may not necessarily support all the proposals in the Westminster Bill, I doubt that any of us can find fault with the principles driving the need for reform.

Turning to today's motion, I am personally aware of the concerns that are being voiced with regard to the reforms. I will soon bring forward proposals for a Welfare Reform Bill in Northern Ireland. Within the context of the parity principle, I will seek to address those concerns by ensuring our particular circumstances in Northern Ireland are catered for. It is important that Members understand that welfare reform is not only about changing the social security system but about changing a culture where some people make lifestyle choices to remain on benefits and to make little or no contribution to our society.

In Northern Ireland we have historically high levels of dependency on social security benefits. The number of people who are economically inactive in Northern Ireland is also higher than in any other region of the United Kingdom. The reasons for this are complex and long-standing. The reforms set out to tackle some of the key reasons why people remain on benefits rather than actively seeking work. If we are to achieve the long-term changes that we all wish to see in our society, we must recognise that we need to break intergenerational worklessness, create new role models in families and communities and break the cycle of benefit dependency.

Mr Byrne: Does the Minister accept that young people in the 18-24 age category are likely to have a severe cut in their housing benefit? Is it fair or just that that group of people should be so handicapped? In a recent answer, you said that 175 young people in Strabane would suffer and 155 in Omagh. Is that fair?

Mr McCausland: I ask the Member whether he can actually bear to listen to the entire analysis. One of the shortcomings that I detect in the SDLP and some of its more vocal exponents is that they are big on rhetoric and strong on denial. They live in a state of denial about the realities that we face. Perhaps if they were more constructive about what might be done, we as an Assembly might benefit from their support and advice.

Dr McDonnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: No, I will not give way. I have already given way once, and I will not give way again. It is important that Members from the SDLP actually listen and learn. As I have said to others in the House on occasions, people should bear it in mind that God gave us two ears and one mouth. I am sure that Alasdair

McDonnell would benefit from that little piece of advice. Use them.

If we are to achieve the long-term changes that we all wish to see in our society, we must recognise that we need to break intergenerational worklessness, create new role models and break the cycle of dependency. This will be difficult and will require all of us in the Assembly to show leadership in supporting the measures necessary to achieve these important cultural and societal changes.

I mentioned the long-standing principle of parity. I think it incumbent on me as Minister for Social Development to remind Members what parity actually means in social security matters and how, in practice, the principle operates. In layman's terms, parity effectively dictates that an individual in Northern Ireland is entitled to and is paid the same level of social security benefits and is subject to the same conditions and sanctions as an individual elsewhere in the United Kingdom. In practice, this means that the United Kingdom Exchequer pays social security benefits to Northern Ireland recipients directly. For the 2010-11 financial year, Northern Ireland received £4.9 billion for social security and housing benefit purposes. That funding is not capped and is paid on the basis of needs or claims made. It is treated separately from the Northern Ireland block grant. If the Assembly chooses not to bring in the reforms, any additional costs would have to be met by the Northern Ireland Executive. Perhaps at some point we will be told whether those cuts would come from the health budget, the education budget or whatever.

Since I became Minister for Social Development, one of my key priorities has been exploring with ministerial colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions the flexibilities that might be available in the welfare reform programme. I have been keen to understand those flexibilities to enable the Executive to carefully consider how the reforms can be shaped to meet Northern Ireland's specific needs. I have regular discussions and meetings with the key Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions, including Lord Freud, who has overall responsibility for welfare reform, and Maria Miller, who is taking forward the changes to DLA and child maintenance. I am currently planning to meet with Lord Freud next month to discuss the specific issues that will relate to Northern Ireland once the Welfare Reform Bill in Great

Britain has received Royal Assent. That is one of the weaknesses in the SDLP motion, which

"calls on the Executive to make opposition ... their highest priority".

It says that as though that is not already the case. The motion also calls on the Executive to "immediately pursue robust negotiations" as though that is also not already the case. It also asked the Executive to:

"pursue all possible legal and operational flexibilities."

Those are things that we are already doing. They may not have featured on the SDLP's radar, that party may not have known of them, or they may have passed it by. However, the fact is that that is what we have been doing. That is why we have met Lord Freud, Maria Miller and others; that is why we have met the Secretary of State and asked him to use his influence with DWP; and that is why our officials are in daily contact with DWP. That happens because these are issues that we have been working on for quite some time. I have regular discussions on the matter, we are working on those things, and we will continue to do so. We will continue to do what we have been doing.

I note that an SDLP delegation also recently met Lord Freud to discuss its concerns. Welfare reform is one of the most important pieces of legislation in recent years, and it is essential that all political parties are fully engaged in understanding the details of the reforms and, within the principle of parity, put forward constructive ideas on how to shape and influence the legislation. Officials from my Department are working closely with those of the Department for Work and Pensions to shape how the reforms and the associated information technology systems are to be implemented. Part of that work is ensuring that Northern Ireland's specific needs are properly addressed. The work is progressing at a pace, given that the timescale for implementing many of the changes is during 2013. That reinforces my point and explains why it is important that all political parties positively engage in exploring and understanding Northern Ireland's needs.

The Executive have a real focus on delivering for the people of Northern Ireland and have set out their priorities in the Programme for Government. That includes a commitment to make changes to the welfare system not only

because of the parity principle but because we believe that there are aspects of the reforms that will make a positive contribution to Northern Ireland's long-term future. We have now established an Executive subcommittee on which all parties in the Executive are represented. Mark Durkan spoke of setting up an Ad Hoc Committee. We have an Executive subcommittee on which all parties are represented, and we have the work of the Committee for Social Development. So, the idea of a cross-departmental approach is already in operation. The committee has been tasked with developing an Executive response to welfare reform that is inclusive of how we can mitigate its negative aspects. It meets regularly — in fact, its next meeting is this afternoon — and it reports to the full Executive on key issues where it believes action will be required.

One of the key priorities for the Executive is tackling poverty in Northern Ireland. The introduction of universal credit is a reform that is focused on tackling one of the root causes of poverty. That benefit will help to get people back to work by ensuring that they are always better off in paid work than living on benefits. It simplifies the benefits system and ensures that, when people move into work or increase their hours at work, they are not penalised by losing the other benefits that they use to meet daily living expenses. It challenges families on benefits to take on the responsibilities and make the types of decision that working families encounter on a daily basis. It will be more expensive than the current system, but the longer-term gains are so important that the additional investment has been secured. Universal credit in Northern Ireland will put more money into people's pockets while protecting the most vulnerable and disadvantaged by ensuring that there are no losers when it is introduced. Universal credit will not solve the problems of poverty, but it gives us an important tool in the battle.

4.15 pm

Some critics have asked where the jobs are for the people who are moving onto the new work-focused regimes. That is a valid question, which I will address by pointing out that the reform of the welfare system will not happen overnight. Universal credit will take up to four years to implement. If we are to benefit from an upturn in the local economy, we need to ensure that we have a labour force that is

skilled and committed to work. I appreciate the work that my Executive colleague Dr Stephen Farry is taking forward in DEL to help people into employment. The introduction of a work programme for Northern Ireland will be critical if we are to achieve the benefits from universal credit. I look forward to working with him on that important initiative.

We also need to recognise that many of the people who are economically inactive were not able to avail themselves of jobs when we had full employment and there were plenty of vacancies in the local economy. The reasons for that are complex, but there is no doubt that one of them was that the social security system ensured that they were better off out of work than in it. The reforms will tackle that perverse behaviour.

As Minister for Social Development, I am committed to having a social security system that has a real focus on protecting the vulnerable members of our society. I am also committed to taking forward real action to ensure that welfare reform is implemented, taking account of the circumstance of Northern Ireland and not just talking about it.

The motion rightly points out the high levels of disadvantage and refers to the high proportion of people in Northern Ireland on DLA. Nearly one in 10 of our population is on DLA, and in reforming the benefit we need to ensure that we provide positive support for people who will undergo the new assessment process. Where the motion fails, however, is that it does not recognise that the new benefit builds on DLA rather than dismantling it. The purpose of the new personal independence payment benefit is to ensure that only people who really need financial support receive it. The new benefit has many of the core principles that underpin DLA, such as providing financial support to people with a disability. It will be tax-free; it will be paid whether you are in or out of work; and it is a non-contributory benefit. My Department has ensured that the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland have been incorporated into the design of the new assessment process for PIP. Last summer, we piloted the new process with over 200 customers in Northern Ireland. That is real action being taken to address the consequences of the Welfare Reform Bill rather than just talking about the changes.

In recent months, my Department has been consulting political parties, the voluntary and community sector and the people of Northern Ireland on how we will replace the social fund when it is abolished in 2013.

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

Mr McCausland: Last year, over 200,000 people in Northern Ireland turned to the social fund. That is one example of the sort of measure that can be considered. There has been significant commentary —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McCausland: — on the issue of benefits. I assure Members that we are already doing all that we can, and we would welcome the support and help of others in that regard.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I will wind on our party's amendment, which adds to the SDLP motion. There are elements of the motion that may be repetitious or dealt with elsewhere. However, our party concurs with the broad sentiment of the motion.

I ask the SDLP to accept our amendment and other Members to support it. It adds a reality check to the motion in so far as the British Government have rejected all proposed changes thus far, even those from their own coalition partners never mind a whole range of other stakeholders, from church leaders to Members of this House who are also Members of that House. The British Government have rejected all notions of change so far, so I do not underestimate the uphill battle that there will be.

I listened to the Minister and have no doubt that his intentions are to mitigate the most negative aspects of the Welfare Reform Bill, as he will have to table it shortly in this House. By the same token, we wish to reject the DUP amendment for a simple reason. I accept entirely the sentiment of the amendment. However, in everything that I have heard in the past several months about welfare reform, everyone starts by saying they accept the principle of reform to simplify the system, and that is right. By the same token, however, that acceptance by a wide range of parties and organisations has been completely abused by the current British Government because they will always say, "Yes, everybody welcomes simplifying the system". Certainly, we would,

in principle. However, the Welfare Reform Bill put forward by the British Government has nothing to do with simplifying the system; it is about cutting the welfare budget. The British Government say that the social fund needs to be reformed, and the Department here is working through proposals to change that, which means a 10% top slice coming off the budget right away. We are told that we can do what we want with the social fund, so that is an issue where parity does not matter. I want to deal with parity a little more in a moment or two.

Having listened to a range of people over the past several months as Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development, I know that every organisation that came before the Committee told members about a litany of problems that will be faced by a lot of people whom all parties in the House represent. We have a duty to listen to those people.

I accept entirely that there are big issues around parity. I am not suggesting for one second that we just frivolously ignore those; I know that we cannot. We had the trade union NIPSA, for example, before the Committee the other week saying that it accepts parity "warts and all" on the basis that it is a big can of worms that cannot be opened. Its members will have to implement the changes when they come in even though they may not like it. However, that is the reality that we face. In proposing this amendment and supporting the SDLP motion, we are not suggesting that parity can be ignored. What we are saying is that we have choices, and we have to make choices.

I, like anybody else, can give anecdotes. I met a young person in Dunelm on Saturday afternoon working in a shop to get a few bob — to do what? Not to go out for the weekend or save up for Christmas but to get his fare to Australia. He is a young lad just after getting a university degree in Liverpool, and he and four of his mates are now saving up with weekend work to go away. It is a shame that our society, as a result of impositions from London, is getting our young kids skilled up and university educated to send them across the world to work. The big destination now is Australia.

We have choices to make. We cannot abolish parity but, as the Minister suggested, we need to look at parity and how the Department here, under our direct authority, could administer the system differently and more fairly. If needs

be, we need to look at measures on which the Assembly is prepared to make informed decisions. It might cost us £10 million or £50 million, but let us at least have that debate. It is not fair to just say that it is parity and there is nothing we can do: there are things we can do. We may or may not be able to moderate the Bill coming from London. I am looking around the Chamber, and everybody who spoke in the debate said the same thing —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mr A Maskey: They said that there are problems with the Welfare Reform Bill. What is critical is that we all work together to tackle the worst elements of that Bill —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up.

Mr A Maskey: — to help the most vulnerable in our society. They are not all feckless, workless people.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Time is up, please.

Mr A Maskey: A lot of them are hard-working, well-educated people who are thrown on the dole queue in their tens and dozens every week.

Mr Douglas: We started today with our friend Alex Easton, who said that we all recognise the difficulties with the reforms proposed by the coalition Government. The Minister himself recognises that there are major problems and that we need to work together as an Executive to mitigate some of those difficulties coming down the track for us all. As Alex Easton said, we are in receipt of something like £5 billion from the Treasury annually by way of benefit payments, and that is expected to increase by 18% by 2015. I think we are all saying that there are problems not just in Northern Ireland or in the UK but right across Europe. So, how do we deal with that? The Bill is coming down the track and, unless we prepare for it now, we will have major problems right across the United Kingdom.

As my friend Alex Easton said, we need to continue, not start. The Minister made a good point about that today. That is one of the problems that we have with the motion. A lot of work has gone on, and the Minister has worked extremely well to try to deal with some of the issues. He met a range of Ministers, and officials are meeting officials from the Department for Work and Pensions. We are in

daily contact with our officials here and, at one of the meetings, I asked about the whole notion of parity. The Chairperson of the Committee will agree with that. We were told that we could lose between £4 billion and £5 billion. Therefore, if we are going to push the parity line, we need to see whether it will cost us that. According to the facts and figures, it definitely will.

Alex Easton referred to the tone of the SDLP motion and the suggestion that not enough was being done. We are doing all that we can in the areas that I have outlined.

Mr F McCann: There are a number of things in what you said. First, at every meeting over the past two and a half years since welfare reform was first discussed, when parity came up, officials said that the cost would be £8 billion, £5 billion, £400 million, £50 million, and then £12 million. We have never had concrete figures. Most of the assumptions made by officials have been to scare us into making decisions that would not run against parity.

Mickey Brady and I have been at public meetings organised by people in the community sector. One of the really frightening things is that most people do not know what is coming at them. Most people do not know what the cuts will mean. When you speak to people —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. That is a very long intervention.

Mr F McCann: It is. I am glad that you stopped me there. However, my point is that we need to get the message out there so that people understand what is coming at them.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be pleased to know that he has an extra minute.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have about six pages here. The point is well made. These debates are about discussing the issues in an open and frank manner.

Mark Durkan made the strong point about the wider implication for businesses, which was that money would not circulate as a result of the cuts. I think that Alex Maskey referred to that as well. However, as the Minister said, this will not happen overnight. Welfare reform will take at least four years. At least we have four years to try to plan, to encourage people into employment and to encourage the sustainability of Northern Ireland.

Mickey Brady, a colleague on the Social Development Committee, mentioned the “D” word: demonisation. He made a strong point that came up in Committee. He felt that this was about Tory cuts and about Tories attacking the most vulnerable. He highlighted the effect on people with disabilities and said that they were some of the poorest in society. I concur with that. The Minister agreed that there are vulnerable people out there. Therefore, in terms of the Welfare Reform Bill and these interventions, we will have to work hard and be as honest as possible in order to try to subvert some of this and defend the most vulnerable in our community.

Michael Copeland sought an assurance that the Minister would look at some of the contentious issues, and the Minister has given us that assurance today. Those of us who work in the communities with the most vulnerable — the long-term unemployed or whatever —

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

Mr Douglas: We see that on a daily basis. I support amendment No 1.

4.30 pm

Ms Ritchie: If you listened to the debate across the piece, you will know that there were 11 participants and about five interventions from Members. There is absolutely no doubt that, as my colleagues Dr Alasdair McDonnell and Mark Durkan said, the proposals being brought forward by the coalition Government in the Welfare Reform Bill, and, if not changed, the universal credit Bill when it comes to the Assembly, will lead to some of the most significant and detrimental changes to welfare reform and impact in a very detrimental way on the money available to the most vulnerable people, the people at the bottom in our society. It will deepen poverty. It will increase levels of fuel poverty, because people will have less income with which to purchase fuel. In Northern Ireland, there is a lower level of wages and less access to purchasing power. All in all, the proposals will be detrimental and will prove quite devastating. As Professor Eileen Evason said, they are a tsunami of cuts that are going to come down and probably undermine and wash many people away.

Therefore, in assessing what Members said, I was quite taken aback at some of the

contributions. For example, Alex Easton spent the first six minutes undermining and involving himself in political point scoring against — catcalling, in many ways — the SDLP. I can tell you that it was the SDLP that warned about the welfare reform proposals. It was the SDLP that, when in the Department for Social Development, went, several years ago, to several British Government Ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions about flexible arrangements that could be introduced in relation to other matters. In fact, it was my colleague Alex Attwood, last year, who opened the discussions with Lord Freud about possible mitigation measures that could be brought about to prevent deepening levels of disadvantage and deprivation. That is what we should have been hearing about today, rather than the fact that you are going to meet Lord Freud. We actually have done that —

Mr McCausland: So have I, if you would only bother listening here.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. No shouting across the Chamber.

Ms Ritchie: I was slightly confused about the position of Michael Copeland and his colleague Roy Beggs. Do they support welfare reform? We all support the principle of getting people back into work. However, some people in this Chamber have failed to recognise that there are not the work opportunities available to people. We must recognise and acknowledge that. That is why the SDLP is asking for a special Ad Hoc Committee to deal with welfare reform. It is only by detailed scrutiny of the legislation and working directly with British Government Ministers that we will be able to try to provide and make sure that there are mitigation measures. I still ask the Minister to deal with those issues.

Mickey Brady, Fra McCann and Alex Maskey indicated that they support the principle of helping those who are most in need. I hope that they will be able to join us in the Lobbies this evening and support our motion.

Mr A Maskey: I appreciate that the Member has limited time. I do not want to do a Fra McCann and eat up all your time, but let me just make this point. In my comments this afternoon, I tried to get Members across all the parties to unite on the issue. I could have attacked your party, and said that you stood in the Chamber as Minister seeking accelerated passage

because you did not want to breach parity, but let us work together on this. Let us not try to score points, because I think that your party might be a little bit more vulnerable. I have said very clearly that we do support your motion, warts and all. We support the motion, but reject the DUP's amendment. We support our amendment, which adds benefit to your motion. Let us work together on what we can agree on. Let us not score points; it is too important.

Ms Ritchie: I was quite clear that the purpose of the ad hoc Committee is for Members from all parties in the House to work together to tackle the main problems in the welfare reform proposals; deal with draft legislation line by line; provide the required scrutiny; and, above all, act against the measures coming down the line that will impact detrimentally on all families, young people, elderly people and people with disabilities across the spectrum in Northern Ireland. Sometimes, people want to listen only to what they think that they want to hear.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: No. I will not give way. I will continue.

There were absolutely spurious arguments from the Minister for Social Development, who said that there will be an increase in spending on benefits. I challenge that. There have been numerous spurious claims that the level of spending on benefits is set to increase steadily in the North in the period ahead. Indeed, a figure of 18% has been mentioned. Nowhere has that argument been advanced more spuriously or furiously than by the Minister of Finance and Personnel himself, Sammy Wilson. The truth is that that figure is derived mainly from inflation and some fanciful projections of demand for universal credit that are based on a Treasury view from the south-east of England.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for raising that detail. In fact, the aim of the proposals being rubber-stamped by the Minister is to reduce DLA by 20%. At a briefing from officials the other day, we were told that DLA will be reduced by £160 million. That affects 37,000 people. That is what we face. It is about time that the Assembly had a reality check, which is why we propose to incorporate all parties in an ad hoc working group to go through those reforms meticulously line by line.

Ms Ritchie: I thank my colleague Mr McGlone for his intervention. When all is said and done,

the SDLP motion says that the Executive must oppose Tory welfare reform measures as their number one priority. However, the DUP amendment says that the Assembly should not oppose them. That is implicit to a certain degree. I challenge Mr Maskey on that. If he were really explicit, he would say that his party is coming out to support the SDLP motion. Sinn Féin is saying that, although it shares some SDLP concerns —

Mr A Maskey: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ritchie: I will not give way at the moment. I will come back to that. Sinn Féin is saying that, although it shares some SDLP concerns about welfare reform, it will not stand up for the victims of that reform. If Mr Maskey is saying that he will now support the SDLP motion, I accept that.

Let us be clear: if you support the DUP amendment, you are saying that you will not stand up for people in greatest need. The Minister can laugh, but only the SDLP motion promises to stand up for those at the bottom. Although Sinn Féin now says that it will support my party's motion, its amendment simply blames the Brits. My party is saying that the Assembly must stand up to London. We have stood up to London before. The DUP refused to accept the devolution of policing and justice until London stumped up a decent budget for it. We, rightly, united to demand hundreds of millions of pounds for the beleaguered members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society and forced London to help. Recently, we argued about the unfair impact of air passenger duty in the North. Again, we forced London to help.

There we have it. The DUP will fight London over prisons and money for prison staff, pensioners in the Presbyterian Mutual Society and air passengers. However, it will not lift a hand to help people in need or people who need help most — those at the bottom of the welfare system. Frankly, that is a disgrace. The Assembly has an opportunity to stand up for the most vulnerable; the people who rely on it most. The SDLP says, "Do the right thing. Support people at the bottom of the system. Support our motion."

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I put the Question on amendment No 1, I advise Members that, if it is made, I will not put the Question on amendment No 2, as the wording to which it relates will have been deleted. I hope that is clear.

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

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 44

AYES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Douglas and Mr G Robinson.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Byrne and Mrs McKeivitt.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put, That amendment No 2 be made.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 44; Noes 45.

AYES

Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Dr Farry, Mr Ford, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín,

Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Brady and Mr A Maskey.

NOES

Mr Agnew, Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend, Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Douglas and Mr G Robinson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 38; Noes 44

AYES

Mr Agnew, Ms M Anderson, Mr Attwood, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Mr Brady, Mr Byrne, Mr W Clarke, Mr Doherty, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Mr Lynch, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McDevitt, Dr McDonnell, Mr McElduff, Mr McGlone, Mr McKay, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr A Maginness, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mr P Ramsey, Ms S Ramsey, Ms Ritchie, Ms Ruane, Mr Sheehan.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Byrne and Mrs McKeivitt.

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr S Anderson, Mr Beggs, Ms P Bradley, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree, Mrs Dobson, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mr Elliott, Mr Frew, Mr Gardiner, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Hussey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Mr McCallister, Mr McCausland, Mr McClarty, Mr B McCrea, Mr I McCrea, Mr McGimpsey, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McQuillan, Lord Morrow, Mr Moutray, Mr Nesbitt, Mrs Overend,

*Mr G Robinson, Mr Ross, Mr Storey, Mr Swann,
Mr Weir, Mr Wilson.*

*Tellers for the Noes: Mr Douglas and
Mr G Robinson.*

Main Question accordingly negatived.

Adjourned at 5.18 pm.



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