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Suggested amendments or corrections will be considered by the Editor.

They should be sent to:

The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.

Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 6 March 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Ministerial Statements

North/South Ministerial Council: Health and Food Safety

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I wish to make a statement on the thirteenth North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting in the health and food safety sectoral format, which took place in the NSMC joint secretariat offices in Armagh on Thursday 2 February 2012. Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Dr James Reilly TD, Minister for Health, and Frances Fitzgerald TD, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. I chaired the meeting on this occasion. This statement has been agreed with Minister O'Neill, and I make the statement on behalf of both of us.

Minister Reilly and I welcomed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Ireland, Northern Ireland and the US National Cancer Institute in December 2011. The memorandum of understanding will enable the continuation for the next five years of joint programmes in cancer education, training, research and prevention. We also welcomed the launch by the Northern Ireland Cancer Registry and the National Cancer Registry of the 'All Ireland Cancer Atlas: 1995-2007' and the launch of the new All-Ireland Institute for Hospice and Palliative Care. The institute will deliver education, research and care services for people who are nearing the end of life with illnesses that include cancer. We noted the continuation of the US/Ireland R&D partnership and welcomed the participation of a high-level member of the US State Department as co-chair of its steering group.

Ministers welcomed the progress to date on arrangements for the radiotherapy unit at

Altnagelvin and noted that construction is planned to commence in 2013, with an operational date of 2016.

Ministers also noted the success of the North/South conference on alcohol misuse, which was held in Armagh on 26 January 2012. Over 130 delegates from many sectors attended the conference, which included informative presentations from local and international speakers. It was agreed that the two Health Departments would develop proposals on how joint work in that area could be taken forward in a more structured way, and consideration is being given to that. The Council also noted the development of strategies in both jurisdictions on alcohol and drug misuse and the continuing commitment of the Departments to share information and best practice to address those issues. We also noted the forthcoming publication of a 10-year tobacco control strategy for Northern Ireland and noted that regulations to introduce text and photo warnings on tobacco products were introduced in Ireland in December 2011.

Joint progress on suicide prevention was also noted, including the National Office for Suicide Prevention and the Public Health Agency part funding an all-island project targeting the issue of suicide and young men.

Minister Fitzgerald and I jointly launched the interjurisdictional protocol for the transfer of child care cases between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The protocol will allow for the sharing of information between the statutory authorities in relation to children who are in care or are on the child protection register or those for whom there is a level of concern and who move between jurisdictions. The protocol will be made available to appropriate health and social care and health service executive staff and will be included on both departmental websites. The Council acknowledged the work undertaken by the five existing child protection subgroups, noted

that the work of those subgroups was largely completed and that the cross-border steering group on child protection will bring forward a new work programme to the next NSMC health and food safety meeting.

Turning to the food safety sector, Ministers welcomed the recently appointed chairperson of Safefood, Ms Lynn Ní Bhaoighealláin, to her first NSMC meeting. Ministers received a progress report on the activities of Safefood, including scientific and promotional activities and the results of the market research on the initial phase of the Stop the Spread obesity and excess weight campaign. The progress report also provided an update on a research report on food poverty funded by Safefood. The Council discussed the main priorities for Safefood in 2012 and reviewed progress in finalising its business plan and budget. Although Dr Reilly and I indicated the necessity of constraint on the budget for Safefood, we assured the meeting of our ongoing support for the statutory role of the body now and for the foreseeable future. Ministers welcomed a presentation by Dr Gary Kearney from Safefood on the work of knowledge networks. The networks will help facilitate greater knowledge sharing by those involved in all parts of the food chain to support and enhance food safety with an overall aim of ensuring that consumers can continue to have confidence in the food that they eat.

The Council noted recommendations from the St Andrews Agreement review concerning the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB) referred by the November 2011 NSMC plenary meeting. The two Health Departments will now consult with the FSPB and bring forward proposals for consideration at the next NSMC health and food safety meeting. In addition, Minister Reilly and I agreed to publish on each Department's website the North/South feasibility study, which was made available for viewing from 2 December 2011. It is important to recognise that the study was commissioned in a different economic landscape, and my Department and the health service now face serious budget pressures. However, I shall continue to support North/South projects where such developments deliver better outcomes for people and are cost-effective.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement

and thank him for the briefing on it that he gave me and the Deputy Chairperson yesterday.

Last Thursday, the Health Committee held its first formal joint meeting with the health committee in Dublin, and a number of areas of co-operation came up, many of which have been covered in the statement. It is important to have that co-operation because, as you can see from the statement, there is progress on the whole issue of health, especially around border areas.

The issue of the radiotherapy unit at Altnagelvin Hospital was raised. During the meeting, confirmation was given that the Irish Government are committed to the money that they set aside for the capital costs. However, there was nothing on the running costs. Therefore, it is important for you to give us an idea of where we are with the issue of running costs.

The issue of suicide also came up. It is important that the joint work in progress on suicide prevention is mentioned. However, you said that the progress was noted, including a number of issues on an all-island project targeting the issue of suicide and young men. Minister, I would appreciate it if you could give us more detail on that issue, if you have it available today. If not, I ask you to send it to me, as the matter came up during the meeting and is of interest to everyone who was at the meeting.

Mr Poots: The issue of capital costs at Altnagelvin is dealt with. Discussions are ongoing on the costs associated with its running and the contribution that should be made for people receiving care who are from the Republic of Ireland. I hope to bring that to a conclusion in a reasonable and sensible way. It is not a matter of cross-subsidisation; it is a matter of people paying their way. That is important in this instance and in other instances where people from the Republic of Ireland make use of our healthcare facilities. We are happy to give people care, but we do not want to subsidise that to the detriment of the people who elect us to this House.

In dealing with suicide, we obviously have the Protect Life strategy, which is being examined and updated. The latest figures for 2011 have not yet been updated, but the current rate of suicide is 15.4 deaths per 100,000 of the population. The target that we were looking at was 10.7 deaths per 100,000. Any death is unacceptable, but realistically, that target is not an unreasonable one to aim for. The rate of

suicide has been rising over the past number of years. We need to arrest that rise, turn it around and challenge it. We need to get the right messages out to people and properly use resources, and those are all courses of work that we will do. Where there is common ground between what we do and what happens in the Republic of Ireland, we need to see how best other people do things and evaluate that so that we can have the best possible response to the awful blight on our society that is suicide.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his statement today. What work is going on to address alcohol abuse through the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mr Poots: We had a very useful conversation on alcohol abuse. At the North/South conference in Armagh on 26 January 2012 Minister Shortall was very much of the view that she wants to press this forward in the Republic of Ireland. She recognises the problems of having cheap alcohol available and the abuse that takes place in homes and among families — young people abusing themselves — and the implications that it has for the health service, justice and society as a whole. That is now recognised by Ministers on both sides of the border.

Leadership is being given on the issue, and we are commissioning work that will help us establish all the facts that will allow us to move forward to legislate on the issue. We are keeping a close eye on what is happening in Scotland and are being regularly updated on that. Our officials work closely with our Scottish counterparts in the work that they are doing. I was glad to see that David Cameron has come on board over the past week. It would be good if the British Isles as a whole had a minimum price for alcohol and alcohol was not abused as it is currently, with the consequences that it has for society.

Mr McCallister: I welcome the Minister's statement. I would like to have heard more cast-iron guarantees from the Minister in answer to the Chair's question about the revenue costs associated with the centre at Altnagelvin. My party has always supported cross-border co-operation where it makes sense and there are obvious benefits for the populations in both jurisdictions. Will the Minister update us on any discussions he had with his opposite number about Daisy Hill Hospital in Newry?

10.45 am

Mr Poots: That was not part in the meeting. However, conversations continue at senior level in the Civil Service about what services are available at Daisy Hill Hospital, what is used by people from the Republic of Ireland and what potential there is for more people from the Republic of Ireland to use such services and for us to get the appropriate money for providing those services.

I have some concern, which is being raised with counterparts in the Republic of Ireland, that, for example, people are coming across and using the A&E facility. Of course, in the Republic of Ireland, you have to pay for a lot of this. You have to pay for your GPs and prescriptions. People who live on the border are taking advantage of the benefits that exist in the system that we have here. It is important that we are fully reimbursed for that. I feel that, at this moment, we are not getting full reimbursement. We get substantial reimbursement but not full reimbursement. It is not the role of this Executive to subsidise healthcare in the Republic of Ireland, and we need to ensure that that is not the case.

Mr Durkan: I welcome the Minister's statement and his continued recognition of the importance of North/South collaboration and his work in that regard. I was also at the meeting in Leinster House last week and was struck by how much progress can be made through intensified collaboration. A problem shared is a problem halved, and we have quite a few problems on this island.

I welcome the confirmation regarding the capital commitment to the radiotherapy unit. I actually flagged it up —

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

Mr Durkan: — at the meeting on running costs. It is important that this tangible symbol of cross-border collaboration does not become a white elephant. Is the Minister confident that the unit will be able to attract necessarily qualified staff to maintain its running?

Mr Poots: I am very confident. Unfortunately, there is an oversupply of radiographers in Northern Ireland, many of whom are very keen to get work. We need to make better use of allied health professionals in general. They can

create significant savings in the health service in providing early interventions and preventions.

We will proceed with establishing training for radiographers at an early point so that, come 2016, people will be ready to fulfil those roles and meet the requirement to have a first-class facility in the north-west.

Mr McCarthy: Like others, I welcome the statement. The Ministers received a progress report on the activities of Safefood and an update on the research report on food poverty. Will the Minister elaborate on the contents of that, given that we have recently been told about the enormous food wastage right across the country? What level of food poverty are we talking about?

Mr Poots: As regards Safefood, one of the concerns that we have about food and poverty is that many people who do not have a lot of income spend it on the wrong types of food. They very often go to supermarkets or pound shops and buy the wrong sort of food, which contributes to obesity and ill health. We need to encourage people to get back to basics. An awful lot of skills have been lost in the last two or three generations. As a consequence, people do not seem to know how to go to the local greengrocer and buy quality vegetables or how to buy some of the cheaper cuts of meat and prepare a nutritious dinner for their family. There needs to be work on training and educating our young people about how to provide quality food in the home. Unless we get that through to young people, we will be defeated. Such skills are not being passed on in the home any more, and therein lies the challenge.

Ms P Bradley: I also thank the Minister for today's statement, which is welcome. Like Mr McCarthy, I want to bring up the issue of Safefood in respect of obesity. As the Minister knows, over 20 Members took part in the Stop the Spread campaign. Some did better than others, and I will not say how I did. What plans does the Minister have to address the issue of obesity?

Mr Poots: The work of the obesity forum was externally evaluated. The evaluators found that all aspects of the forum were well managed over the past three years and that it provided updates, information and resources on obesity. The three components of the forum — closed meetings, workshops and the e-bulletin — all played a valid and complementary part in helping to address the objectives. It has, therefore, been

agreed that the forum will continue for a further three years.

The forum assists with identifying common areas for action in the obesity reduction policies of the two jurisdictions. It also facilitates the exchange of best practice, with most networking through half-yearly workshops on a range of topics that typically attract more than 100 participants. Workshop topics to date have included men's health, communication, physical activity and partnerships for tackling obesity in young people. A comprehensive e-bulletin, providing updates and links to relevant topics, is distributed to a wide range of professionals.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. I understand that the two Ministers are reviewing the work undertaken by Safefood and that there needs to be consensus on what its priorities should be. We are now in the third month of 2012, and yet you seem to be saying that Safefood's business plan and budget for 2012 have not yet been finalised. This is a matter of urgency for the organisation. It needs to be able to plan its work programme for the year. Can you give us some idea of when that business plan will be signed off?

Mr Poots: Minister Reilly and I certainly have some concerns about the fact that Safefood's work replicates that of other bodies. In constrained financial times, we cannot justify two organisations carrying out the same work. For example, Safefood was doing work on obesity even though the Public Health Agency was already doing work on that. Safefood is also straying into work that the FSA is carrying out. Given our really difficult financial circumstances, there is little value in paying twice to get the same job done. So, Minister Reilly and I agree that we need to review Safefood's work and identify whether there is a way forward that will allow it to continue to do good and effective work without duplication. It is logical that we do that.

Mr Gardiner: I also thank the Minister for his statement. Will he detail how many staff are employed by the Food Safety Promotion Board in total and how many are on each side of the border?

Mr Poots: I do not have those figures to hand, but I will make them available to the Member in writing.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his statement. Are there one or two dedicated officials in the Department who focus on liaising and dealing with Safefood? If that were the case, it would help to clarify the interests of the northern part of the Food Safety Promotion Board. I served on the board in the past, and I feel that it does worthwhile work. However, it needs to make sure that it is focused on what it has to do north and south.

Mr Poots: There are people in the Department who are in regular contact with representatives from Safefood. They identify what the Department's priorities are, and we give encouragement to Safefood in respect of its work. The bottom line is that ministerial agreement on such issues is required. At present, Minister Reilly and I seek a way forward that will ensure that any work done benefits both jurisdictions and will not mean that we pay more money for the same service.

Mr Allister: I wish to revert to the issue raised by Mr Gardiner. In 2011, the Minister's response to my question was that Safefood employed 31 people, none of them in Northern Ireland. He also told me that the employees' community background was not monitored. In June 2011, the Minister said that he would ask for the community background of Safefood staff to be monitored. Did that happen? What was the outcome?

Mr Poots: My understanding is that there is a record of the monitoring that has taken place. We will seek to make it available if Members so wish.

Mr Campbell: I welcome the statement. The Minister referred to the radiotherapy unit, on which construction will commence in 2013. Is he in a position to outline roughly when in 2013 that construction will commence? Will he outline the benefits that would accrue to sufferers not only in Northern Ireland but in the Republic of Ireland if we, hopefully, were able to receive full payment for treatment offered to people in the Republic?

Mr Poots: The first element of the outline business case, OBC 1, is complete, allowing us to move ahead with commissioning enabling works and project support, which includes absolutely necessary consultancy work. We will move on to OBC 2, which is nearing completion, and we trust that it will be ready to come to the Department in the next few weeks.

The real benefit is that radiotherapy is a relatively short treatment. Often, someone who travels

from Strabane or Londonderry, for example, has to travel for one and a half or two hours to get to Belfast for maybe 10 or 15 minutes of treatment. They then have to travel for one and a half or two hours to get back home. The unit will make this type of treatment very accessible to over 90% of the population in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is a significant step forward. It will upgrade the standard of care for cancer sufferers. For all of us, moving forward on that project is a win-win situation.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. He acknowledged the work undertaken by the five child protection subgroups and said that the cross-border steering group will bring forward a new work programme. Will he give the House any further detail on what will be included in that forward work programme?

Mr Poots: The interjurisdictional protocol for the transfer of childcare cases is designed to promote and ensure best practice when children known to statutory social services move from one jurisdiction to the other. The protocol offers guidance to practitioners and managers working in statutory sector children's services in both jurisdictions on how cases should transfer from the responsibility of services in one jurisdiction to the other. The protocol builds on existing best practice and ensures a consistent approach to the transfer of all children who are in the care of a statutory authority in either jurisdiction and are considered to be in need or subject to procedures to safeguard and protect children. The protocol and its operation will be reviewed as part of our commitment to work on a cross-border basis to ensure that the most effective safeguarding of children and child protection arrangements are in place between the two jurisdictions. If, subsequently, any additions or amendments need to be made to the protocol to improve practice and outcomes for children, they can be made with the agreement of both Administrations.

Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland and Employer Engagement Plan

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a statement on the skills strategy for Northern Ireland and the launch of the associated employer engagement plan.

The draft economic strategy identifies skills as a crucial ingredient in rebalancing and rebuilding our economy.

Skills help economies to make the most of new opportunities in high-value-added activities; encourage greater investment and innovation; help businesses to compete in export markets; and, ultimately, support economic growth and enhance productivity. Skills are also critical for improving social inclusion.

11.00 am

My Department is working hand in hand with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and Invest Northern Ireland to make sure that we have the necessary skills to support our economic vision. Last year, I launched the skills strategy for Northern Ireland 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures', and I was pleased that members of the Committee attended the launch. In December, it was a real honour to present an international example of best practice on skills at a major skills conference in Washington that was sponsored by the Atlantic Council and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). I am also delighted at the growing interest in our strategy in the European Union.

Our strategy considers the current skills base, examines the skills that we are likely to need in future to grow the Northern Ireland economy and highlights areas for action. Through the strategy, my Department plays, and will continue to play, a key role in raising the skills of the workforce to ensure that businesses have the people they need now and in future.

Skills are widely accepted as the key raw material in the modern, knowledge-based economy and are one of the main drivers in achieving our economic goals. Yet it is clear that our skill levels are generally too low. A large element of the current productivity gap between this region and other regions can be traced to skills deficits, and if Northern Ireland is to compete in

a global economic arena, there must be a concerted effort, on all fronts, to drive up skills.

I am committed to the upskilling of our workforce and to addressing skills shortages and skills mismatches. We must ensure that our economy is working as efficiently as possible. Given, current levels of unemployment, skill shortages are particularly frustrating. It is of the utmost importance that we increase the number of people with higher-level skills, with management and leadership skills and with skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. Those are all important issues for my Department that I am addressing. For example, the Made Not Born campaign continues to engage with businesses to highlight the importance of management and leadership skills and to raise awareness of the training programmes that we offer, such as management analysis and planning and the suite of provision under the management and leadership development programme.

Furthermore, the Success through STEM strategy has made much progress in the past year and will be showcased in the One Year On event that will be held in W5 on the 29 March. The way in which the business sector has worked with government to take forward that work has been crucial. Moreover, following consultation, the higher education strategy will be published in the coming months. That will set out the higher education sector's contribution to the objectives set out in 'Success through Skills – Transforming Futures'. Engagement with the business sector is critical in ensuring that the curriculum is up to date and relevant to the needs of industry. That follows on from similar work in the further education sector.

We cannot rely on the flow of young people into our workforce to change our skills profile: they simply cannot make up for the shortfall within the required timescales. About 80% of those who will make up the 2020 workforce are in the workplace having completed their mandatory education. We must do more to work with employers and encourage them to see how investing in the skills of their workforce can have a real impact on their businesses and the performance of our economy. In turn, we need to ensure that employers are aware of, and can easily access, the relevant departmental programmes and services. With that in mind, I have today launched an employer engagement plan, and I have made a copy of it available on

my Department's website. That plan is key to achieving the ambitious goals set out in the skills strategy, and it focuses particularly on how my Department will engage with businesses over the coming years. It highlights a number of initiatives that will be of particular interest to employers and a selection of related projects.

The employer engagement plan sets out how I will make it easier for local businesses to articulate their skills needs to government and training providers; upskill their workforces; have the excellent training that they offer in-house accredited; have the existing skills of staff recognised; and better utilise those skills in their workforces. In doing so, the strategy will help to rebalance and rebuild the economy. It will also aspire to increase levels of productivity and social inclusion.

Overall, the employer engagement plan includes 20 projects and initiatives that will be delivered predominantly over the next 18 months. I will take the opportunity to outline several key examples of the projects and initiatives covered in the plan. The development of a skills delivery model for emerging sectors is a key project. A demand-led skills system is at the heart of the skills strategy and relies on timely and accurate information from employers and their representatives. To build on that supply of information, the Department will work with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to establish a foresight unit that will help to identify emerging sectors and their specific skill needs. The Careers Service will build on the existing industry fact sheets by examining ways in which that high-quality labour market information can be presented in a clear, accessible and useful way to all its users.

I often hear that employers are confused about how they can access training provision. I readily accept that that is an important issue, and it is one that I have been proactively addressing since becoming Minister. Building on its pilot phase, the Skills Solutions Service will help employers to understand and access training provision, which is available and is crucial to growing the skills that modern business needs. Well-trained and knowledgeable skills solutions advisers are now available to meet any employer on a one-to-one basis anywhere in Northern Ireland, and they can dispel the complexity.

Therefore, I want to take this opportunity to encourage employers to contact my Department

and make use of that free service to find out what support, financial and non-financial, is available to help them to develop the skills of their workforce. To help to raise the skills levels of people in the workplace and establish clear progression routes, the Department will work with a number of leading companies, training organisations and sector skills councils to develop and pilot a higher level apprenticeship in ICT and engineering. I am also committed to increasing the number of learners studying full-time or part-time for foundation degrees.

As part of the employer engagement plan, my Department will design and pilot two management and leadership development invention models for microbusiness across a range of sectors with a view to offering that provision to all microbusinesses. We are also working closely with Invest NI to ensure that an integrated framework for management and leadership is in place. Those two developments will build on the Department's significant provision in that area and help to improve the advice, support and provision offered to a wider range of companies. My Department will also work with employers, particularly those in STEM areas, to encourage more of them to offer placements and scholarships to people studying relevant subjects at college and university. That is an important way in which employers can demonstrate the exciting opportunities that exist in Northern Ireland.

In response to the immediate imperative to rebuild the economy, I want to highlight a number of specific projects. A dynamic new approach in the employment service involves the creation of a new employer engagement team. Such a fresh and innovative approach will provide the advice and guidance that companies need during the current economic downturn. The preselection of suitable clients and pre-employment training to meet their recruitment needs will be key to the service. On-site redundancy services, with partner organisations, will also be on offer to those employers in a redundancy situation.

I am also aware of the concerns raised by employers about the employability skills of young people entering the workforce. Although a lot of excellent work has already taken place in our colleges and universities, I will examine whether more needs to be done to ensure that our young people develop key skills such as teamworking and problem-solving, as well as the

work-based skills needed to gain employment in a highly competitive labour market.

I am also committed to ensuring that, in Northern Ireland, we stay ahead of the game. I have, therefore, introduced a skills-benchmarking project, which will seek to examine and benchmark our performance against other regions as well as assess the Department's performance and its associated impact on productivity and employment against other small, open and developed economies. By undertaking that analysis, we can judge our performance against previous years' efforts and also ensure that we remain competitive internationally.

I make it clear that the launch of the employer engagement plan is not the extent of my ambitions. Since taking office, I have been committed to addressing skills shortages and mismatches. I have recently announced further funding of over £6 million for colleges, through the continuation of the employer support programme for the next 4 years, commencing in this financial year, 2011-12. That programme enables colleges to develop a range of innovative projects to support local employers.

Yesterday, I attended the Software Testers Academy graduation, where 19 academy graduates received their software-testing certificates. Following the identification of a specific deficit of software testers, a pilot 14-week intensive training and placement programme was put in place, specifically targeted at non-information-technology graduates. The academy programme was developed jointly by the Department for Learning and Employment (DEL) and Invest NI, working alongside local industry and the South Eastern Regional College. Virtually all of the 19 trainees who completed the course have secured ongoing employment with their placement company.

I have also identified a number of sectors as priorities for my Department, and I shall outline some of the work that is being taken forward in those areas. The ICT industry continues to be an important driver in the economy, yet specific skills shortages and skills mismatches in software development, infrastructure management and applications management threaten to hamper potential growth in the sector. Building on previous work in that area, I have recently formed a new ICT working group, which brings together representatives from Invest Northern Ireland, DETI, the Department of Education, universities and further education

colleges, the chair of the e-skills employer board, and the relevant business organisations. The purpose of that group is to agree a co-ordinated approach to assessing the ICT sector's current skills needs, to understand issues relating to the relevance of education and training provision, and to take forward an agreed action plan.

Alongside that work, my officials, together with those from Invest NI and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, have been working with representatives from the food and drink manufacturing sector to address their specific skill needs. Work is under way to finalise a short-term action plan to increase management and leadership skills and to attract more talent into the industry. That will be finalised in the coming months. With the industry's vision driving this process, positive change will soon be realised.

Over the next two years, Northern Ireland will host an impressive series of events and celebrations and the launch of many exciting new visitor attractions. Those events offer us an opportunity to showcase what our region has to offer. I recognise the opportunities for the tourism and hospitality industry over this period, and I am determined to make the most of them to provide employment for the local labour market and to boost the local economy. Obviously, the skills of staff in the hospitality sector are fundamental to that success, and I have decided that support for skills development in the sector should be a priority. My Department's skills solutions team has been working with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and People 1st, the sector skills council for hospitality. It has developed and put in place a customised training programme for customer service known as WorldHost.

Other sectors of importance include retail, financial services, advanced manufacturing, advanced engineering and emerging sectors such as health and life sciences. My Department is currently reviewing the future provision and funding arrangements for adult training in the workplace, including apprenticeships, to ensure that resources are targeted more effectively on the priority skill needs of the economy and meet the needs of adult learners. A steering group has been established to take the views of the key stakeholders on the findings of the research and to help formulate the new policy and funding arrangements.

As well as that sectoral approach, my Department continues to work closely with Invest Northern Ireland to maximise our offering to potential inward investors. Under the assured skills programme, my officials work to draw together the talent and expertise contained in our further and higher education sectors, as well as our own experience of assisting companies to find and train new staff.

11.15 am

We are able to put together a custom-built training package that, as well as growing indigenous businesses, assures newcomers to Northern Ireland that the skills that they need to make their investment a success can be found here. That relatively new programme is already playing a strong role in growing our economy and providing employment opportunities for our workers, and I plan to build on that successful work.

The Department cannot achieve the results that we aspire to on its own. It is clear to me that, if we are to make meaningful inroads into improving the skills of our workforce, we need more of our employers to buy into the skills agenda. Northern Ireland needs companies that are serious about training and upskilling their workforce and committed to improving skills for the benefit of their businesses and for Northern Ireland plc. I believe that the projects detailed in the employer engagement plan will help to make real progress towards ensuring that we have the skilled people that we need to avail ourselves of the current and future opportunities and to support the economic vision set out in the economic strategy and the Programme for Government.

Mr Buchanan (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): I welcome the Minister's statement, which sets out in some detail the work that the Department is doing on the issue of skills development and skills shortage in Northern Ireland. Can the Minister give the House some indication of what level of engagement there has been with businesses and employers prior to the establishing of the employer engagement plan, which sets out the 20 projects and initiatives? Can he further elaborate on the role and function of the foresight unit that is being established between DEL and DETI?

Dr Farry: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Committee for his comments and his recognition

of the work that the Department is doing, particularly on the skills agenda, for the future development of the economy in Northern Ireland.

He stressed, quite rightly, the importance of developing this with business. Doing it in a vacuum is completely pointless, so ongoing development of our policies and strategies with the business community is absolutely critical. That has been very clear at all levels, whether we are talking about the skills strategy, the employer engagement plan or some of the specific projects that flow from that plan. We have set up a specific steering group to advise us on the review of adult training, and that draws on representatives from the business community to ensure that what we are doing meets the needs of business.

We have to make sure that what we do in Northern Ireland is incredibly efficient and makes the best use of our scarce resources. Unless we are directly responsive to the needs and views of business, we will not be discharging our duty to spend public money efficiently. So, hopefully, I can give the Member and, indeed, the entire House the reassurance that we are working very closely with business.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Comments were made in last Wednesday's 'The Irish News' by the founder of Powerscreen in County Tyrone, Mr O'Neill, who identified the approach taken by many grammar schools as being too academic in the sense that it results in a situation where there is a shortage of skilled workers becoming available for the local engineering industry. Do the Minister and his Department agree with concerns that, for example, grammar schools do not engage adequately with further education colleges? Has there been, or will there be, extensive engagement with the local engineering sector?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question; he raises some very important issues.

Let me first address the general point that he makes. We have to make sure that what happens with education is highly relevant to the future needs of the economy, and that involves what happens in the school system, in the further education system and in universities. I am very pleased that the Department of Education has come on board the ICT working group, and, to take one example, we are looking at the need to develop more bespoke courses on software programming and software

development as opposed to what is currently the case in ICT, which is more about the use of applications. Employers often do not need that as much as they need the actual software skills.

He mentions issues with engineering. I am very aware of the comments that have been made, and I have heard others expressing them. I recently held discussions on those matters with the CBI, and my officials have followed those up. We are doing a scoping exercise with business to put together a report on what is happening in the engineering sector and whether there are particular skills shortages and mismatches. On the back of that assessment, I am prepared to consider the establishment of a further engineering skills working group to try to bring the education providers and business around a table to thrash out the issues and, potentially, draw together an action plan for that sector. I am very alert to the issues that Mr McElduff has raised, and we will see whether we need to intervene in the manner that I have suggested in a few weeks.

Mr P Ramsey: This is a good announcement by the Minister about the employer engagement plan. Although we can be critical of the Department on many occasions, this is certainly good news. The Minister is clearly aware of the Committee's focus, certainly over the past year or more, on young people not in education or training. Can the Minister assure the House that young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) will not be further marginalised or excluded from upskilling?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question. Let me reassure the Member in a couple of respects. First, in response to Mr Buchanan, I stressed the importance of ensuring that we use the resources within our economy very efficiently. It is my philosophy that every person in this society has the potential to make a contribution to our economy. If we do not invest the resources to allow every person to develop to their full potential, that individual will suffer and our economy will also suffer because we have an untapped resource. We cannot afford resources to be used inefficiently.

To specifically address the comment made by the Member, I am certainly committed to driving up skills across a very broad front. We cannot afford any particular sector to be neglected. The Member will be aware that my Department leads on behalf of the Executive in relation to

NEETs and that we are currently finalising an interdepartmental strategy called Pathways to Success, which I intend to bring to the Executive in April. I will make a full statement to the House thereafter. It goes hand in hand with everything we do.

Mr Dickson: I add my congratulations to the Minister on his statement. Minister, what investment do you consider needs to be made in skills if the Executive were to secure changes to corporation tax in Northern Ireland?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He raises a critical issue. It is important that we recognise that the skills needs of our economy may shift, maybe in some dramatic ways, maybe in some small, subtle ways, in the context of securing a lower level of corporation tax. At present, a lot of the support that we give to the demand side to help business is around the notion of subsidising costs, so we end up attracting investments with the non-profit centres of businesses coming into Northern Ireland. In the event that we had a lower level of corporation tax, we would have a shift in our focus towards incentivising profit making. The particular nature of the business that may grow in Northern Ireland or investment that would come in from overseas may change on the back of that.

It is very important that we are prepared well in advance of that so that we can meet the potential shifts in skills demand that would flow from a lower level of corporation tax. For that reason, I have commissioned a major piece of research to assess those particular points. I am pleased that Oxford Economics is undertaking that, and that report is due to be presented to me before the end of this month. I will be happy to make that research more widely available both to the Committee and wider society.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. I just want to touch on an issue that is relevant in my constituency, where local engineering firms are finding it very difficult to get the appropriate staff with the appropriate skills.

I welcome your engagement plan, but I want assurances that you will spread that out across Northern Ireland and make sure that people can stay in their home town if they wish.

Dr Farry: I thank Mrs Overend for her question. There were probably two elements to it. As for the latter point that she made, it is very much an employer engagement plan for Northern

Ireland. I stressed that the skills solution service is available for employers anywhere. It is not a Belfast-based service, where the employer has to be sucked into that Belfast mindset to take it forward. It is available anywhere in Northern Ireland for businesses to access and to have a bespoke response to the particular needs that they develop.

I am also very interested in the comments that the Member made about engineering. They reflected the comments that were made by Mr McElduff a few moments ago. It is perhaps further confirmation of what I am hearing; that there is potentially an issue in the engineering sector of which we need to be mindful. I give the Member the same assurance that I gave to Mr McElduff. We are currently investigating that in a systematic way. If there seems to be a strong case for an intervention to be made to try to bring together education providers and businesses to address some of the issues, I am certainly very committed to moving ahead in a very short timescale to do that.

Mr Ross: The Minister, quite rightly, talked about the importance of the tourism and hospitality sector, particularly in this year, which is our year of opportunity, with the Titanic signature building opening later this month, the hosting of the Irish Open and the new visitors' centre at the Giant's Causeway being among a range of things that we have. Does the Minister, therefore, agree that it is important that the impression with which visitors leave Northern Ireland is vital to our future tourism product? To that end, will he give us some detail of the type of work that is being done with taxi drivers, bus drivers, tour guides and those who work in hotels to ensure that the service that they offer visitors is up to scratch and that the impression that visitors leave Northern Ireland with is very positive and makes them want to come back?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. He identified a critical issue. It highlights the importance of Ministers and Departments working in partnership around these things. I recognise the work that has been taken forward by the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and the Executive to promote tourism and attract major events to Northern Ireland. My particular responsibility, as Minister for Employment and Learning, lies in investment in the skills of our workforce, which is why I have prioritised tourism and hospitality as a priority skills sector in response to the needs of the

sector and the huge opportunities that exist for Northern Ireland.

The Member was also quite right to identify the importance of people's experience of hospitality and whether they would return to Northern Ireland and recommend to other family members or friends that they should visit Northern Ireland. The evidence from other situations overseas strongly indicates that the level of the hospitality and experience is critical to return visitors, which is why it is so important that we invest. We have put together a bespoke programme called WorldHost, which was developed with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and People 1st, which is the sector skills council. Some very early courses that are based around catering activities have been established through the Northern Regional College, and we are very mindful of moving ahead quickly, given that the Irish Open will be on the north coast this summer.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement. On the back of what has been said, Vancouver in Canada and parts of Australia specialise in hospitality and the tourist industry, and they make people feel special when they arrive. My question is about the consequences of the economic downturn. Thousands of people have lost their jobs in such sectors as the construction industry. Will the Minister explain what is being done to adapt victims of unemployment to new and meaningful opportunities?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCann for his question. He was very apt in drawing attention to Vancouver as the example. The person who organised the Olympic Games in Vancouver for the British Columbia tourist board was the key presenter at the launch of the WorldHost initiative in Northern Ireland. I wondered whether Mr McCann had been there and picked it up. So, yes, we are learning from best international practice.

11.30 am

It is important that we recognise that there is a retraining challenge in the construction sector. In some respects, the Executive will do what they can to increase the demand for construction skills, whether through moving ahead with important capital projects or with the green new deal, which is dear to my heart. It is equally important that we recognise that a number of people in construction will need to be retrained for other activities. Demand

in the future may not be at the level of four or five years ago. All that we do is geared towards offering people who have been through formal education the opportunities to retrain. That is why I stress that 80% of the 2020 workforce are already in work or have left school. The plan is being launched today to focus on their needs, as opposed to the needs of those in the formal education system.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his statement announcing the strategy and plan. I was at Harland and Wolff shipyard recently with my colleague Peter Robinson. During our meetings, senior management said that they had a number of skills shortages. They stressed that flexibility from DEL officials was required with older workers who are very skilled but have maybe 80% of the skills needed to be a piping engineer or an electrician. They supported the work done to date but they encouraged us to ensure that the plan will have a flexibility of working —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member just to —

Mr Douglas: Sorry, I will ask my question. In working with Harland and Wolff and the training providers, will there be that flexibility?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Douglas for his question. I understand the thrust of what he said. It is important to recognise that, on the one hand, we have the formal qualification system that we all know and recognise, and, on the other hand, people doing the job in the workplace may not have those qualifications but, over time, have built up experience and knowledge. That is why one of the key strands in the employer plan is the recognition of, and trying to find a means of accreditation for, that in-house knowledge and in-company training. That is a particular way in which we can address the needs of the type of worker whom Mr Douglas described and of whom there are many others.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat. Ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as a ráiteas agus as a chuid freagraí. I thank the Minister for his statement. He outlined an ambitious strategy. What processes and procedures does he have in place to track and monitor progress?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McCartney for his question. As I stated, we have 20 different projects. We also have a wonderful flow chart, which will be part of the publication on the website showing

the timescales for each of the programmes. That will be made public and be transparent so that I, my officials, MLAs, the public and businesses will be clear about what will be done, when it will be done and by whom it will be done. They will be able to monitor progress.

Mr Byrne: I also welcome the Minister's comprehensive statement, which reflects the general anxiety in industry. Will the Department give due consideration to having more employer-based, quality training schemes, such as those in Bombardier Shorts, which has an excellent school of training for modern apprenticeships and higher technician training? I think that that is crucial, particularly for the engineering industry in Tyrone and mid-Ulster, which was referred to last week by Mr Pat O'Neill.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr Byrne: I am trying to be relevant, Mr Speaker.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Byrne for his question, which reflects some of the issues that Mr Douglas raised about the importance of recognising in-company training and its efficiency.

Often, in the education system, we are essentially making a best guess as to what employers need. That is done with the best of intentions but sometimes with imperfect knowledge. Work training is done within companies and is very directly associated with the particular needs of a particular business.

One of the more exciting aspects of the employer engagement plan lies in the potential to move towards a level 4 apprenticeship, which we hope to commence piloting later in 2012. Members will be aware that, at present, apprenticeships apply only to levels 2 and 3. Level 4 apprenticeship exists elsewhere in the world, and it is important that we make clear that apprenticeships are a very viable and fruitful way of accessing employment, even employment at high levels. We are starting in the ICT and engineering sectors. I hope that that sends out an important signal that there is a range of choices available for young people with regard to their future.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement. The Minister will be aware that 41.6% of the working-age population have no qualifications whatsoever. What flexibility and innovation will his Department bring to encourage the upskilling of this workforce? If I were an employer and I had a large, low-skilled

workforce, I would not want my employees going, during my time, to take those extra qualifications and courses. I suggest that there should be work at weekends and in evening classes that will fit in with the schedules of that workforce, which vitally needs to upskill.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McIlveen for his question, which stretches beyond the immediate scope of the employer engagement plan but highlights the need for an integrated approach to skills. Shortly, I will release a more overarching plan that tries to knit together what we are doing — in higher education, the employment service, further education and this plan to deal with business — to show how it is all integrated.

On the specific points that he raises, we cannot afford for people to be underskilled. We need to invest across a broader front. We have a legacy issue in Northern Ireland, with too many people with low or no qualifications. As to the remedy for that, we offer a whole package of different skills, including essential skills, literacy, numeracy and basic ICT skills. On that point, I say to employers that they should engage with the Skills Solution Service that my Department offers, and the advice on courses. There is flexibility as to when and how such courses are undertaken.

I say to employers that it is of fundamental importance that they invest in the skills of their staff, not out of altruism for Northern Ireland but for the sake of the bottom line of their business. Investing in your staff is a good thing for your business, and the evidence shows that businesses that invest in staff are often better geared to survive through difficult times and will grow more rapidly when there is a recovery in the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Allister: I wish this initiative well. However, I am sure that the Minister agrees that, ultimately, it will be judged not by its promise but its delivery. In that regard, I press the Minister further on the issue of tracking and monitoring its success or otherwise. It surely requires more than the publication of flow charts to drill in and see whether the project is working. Therefore, will there be hands-on monitoring directing this programme and delivering results to make sure that it is achieving?

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to finish.

Mr Allister: More than once, the Employment and Learning Committee has been surprised by the lack of tracking —

Mr Speaker: I must insist that the Member comes to his question.

Mr Allister: Will there be monitoring and hands-on tracking of this programme?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Allister for his question. The comment that he made at the start of it is absolutely true; this will be judged on results and how we improve the skills of people in the workplace. It is also, in a more general sense, about how we match demand and supply in Northern Ireland.

We need the two to be tracked together as efficiently as possible. That is why it is important that I, as Minister, and my Department try to address skills shortages and mismatches where they occur. Those can change and flip over time, and a skills shortage can become a skills glut very quickly, which is why we need constant monitoring and to challenge ourselves in that respect.

I can also give the Member an assurance that the plan will be more than simply a glossy document as far as monitoring is concerned. It is core to my Department and will be deeply embedded in its internal business plans. Indeed, whether it involves the skills directorate, senior management or the permanent secretary, there will be close tracking of our performance and delivery on all the projects set out in the plan today.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning):

I apologise for my delay in getting to the Chamber. There was something of a roadblock on the way down. Nevertheless, here I am.

Minister, I listened intently as you outlined your plan for employer engagement. Can you tell me what role Bill McGinnis, the Department's skills adviser, has had in the development of the strategy and why you think it is necessary to do something different, given that the Department has a skills council advising it?

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair for his question and his ongoing interest in these activities. Bill McGinnis is the skills adviser, and I was pleased to reappoint him this year. He was central to the identification of priority skills sectors, and we continue to build on those. He has an ongoing role in liaising with employers and is very forthcoming in providing feedback. Ultimately, however, Bill McGinnis is not a delivery arm; he is an adviser

and he will feed the business community's views into the Department's work.

Today, we are setting out the action plan and how we will build on what we are hearing from business on the particular needs of employers. We are setting out the projects that will be taken forward over the next 18 months to address the particular concerns raised and to ensure that we in Northern Ireland seize the opportunities to grow our economy over the months and years to come.

Executive Committee Business

Labour Relations Agency Code of Practice on Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I beg to move

That the draft Labour Relations Agency Code of Practice on Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities be approved.

This draft code of practice is subject to approval by resolution of the Assembly as laid down in the governing primary legislation, the Industrial Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1992.

It may be helpful if I outline for Members the background to this draft code. The Labour Relations Agency (LRA) has a legal duty to provide practical guidance that clarifies when an employer should facilitate trade union representatives and members in taking time off. LRA fulfils this obligation through the publication, 'Code of Practice: Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities'.

There is a substantial body of legislation that provides the right to time off for trade union duties and activities in specified circumstances. Such rights also stipulate whether there is a right to pay while conducting such duties and activities. The revised code will assist employers and trade union representatives to better understand the legislation and will help them to deal with the day-to-day issues that can arise when requests for time off are made. It also provides good practice guidance on maintaining positive relationships more generally; for example, through the development of formal agreements and the provision of facilities.

The code, in common with its predecessor, does not confer any new rights. Rather, it offers greater clarity on existing rights and promotes good practice that will help employers and trade unions more effectively to discharge their respective responsibilities. Failure to observe the code will not itself render a party liable to tribunal proceedings. However, the provisions of the code can be admissible in evidence and taken into account by an industrial tribunal during any relevant proceedings.

In these difficult times, it is also important to highlight that the new code does not incur any additional costs for employers. There are

costs associated with the existing statutory framework, which already provides for time off for trade union duties and activities. The draft code imposes no new requirements that would serve to increase that financial burden.

11.45 am

To their credit, many employers often go beyond what the legislation requires in facilitating good industrial relations. However, the code takes a pragmatic approach in making it clear that any potential additional facilities need to be reasonable and proportionate to the particular workplace.

The current code of practice has been in place since 2004 and does not adequately reflect the significant changes that have occurred in the modern workplace. Nor does that code take account of amendments to the governing legislation that were made over the past eight years.

The Labour Relations Agency conducted a 12-week public consultation on the draft code of practice. The consultation sought views on the provision of cover and adjustment of workloads for representatives; advice for line managers of workplace representatives; advice on training and e-learning for workplace representatives; facilitating representatives who have atypical work patterns or who support employees with atypical work patterns; access to ICT equipment and the internet by representatives; the confidentiality of communications involving representatives while ensuring necessary workplace security; and the growth in non-union representation. The responses from key stakeholders demonstrated that the proposed revisions were broadly welcomed.

The draft code provides clear definitions of the various types of trade union representative and interpretation of the extent of rights afforded to them by legislation; more clarity on the calculation of pay for time off for trade union duties, particularly where various shift bonus and performance-related payments apply; guidance on the provision of cover and the adjustment of workloads for representatives; guidance relating to the impact on the modern workplace — for example, the use of ICT equipment, access to e-learning materials and arrangements involving employees and representatives on atypical work patterns; expanded guidance to parties on their mutual obligations, particularly with regard to requesting and facilitating time off while

minimising the impact on business operations; advice on the confidentiality of communications between an employer and representatives and between representatives and the membership of the union; and more detailed advice on the benefits and scope of formal agreements on time off for trade union duties and activities.

LRA has also updated references in the code to take account of changes to the statutory provisions governing time off for trade union duties and activities. I am grateful to LRA for its work in revising the code and consider that it will make a significant contribution to the development of better working relationships between management and trade unions. We are in challenging times, and it is vital that we retain a focus on supporting productive workplaces through the creation of a positive employment relations culture.

I am also grateful to the Committee for Employment and Learning for its scrutiny of the draft code. I hope that I have provided the House with sufficient explanation of the purpose of the revised code of practice. I will, of course, respond in my closing remarks to any points made by Members.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): We agreed at the Committee that I would not speak on behalf of the Committee but as an individual. Nevertheless, I do not think there is anything of contention in the points that the Minister put forward. I agree with him that, in these trying times, it is appropriate that we have the best possible labour relations, and we ought to take every step to support that.

Mr Lyttle: I am happy to support the proposals that are being put forward.

Dr Farry: I am very grateful to all those Members who contributed to the debate — that is what it says in my notes anyway. In all sincerity, however, this is largely a technical matter. I appreciate the comments from Basil McCrea, in a personal capacity, I suppose, rather than as Chair of the Committee. However, what he said reflects that we need a common-sense approach to this issue, and it is in everyone's interests that we promote a harmonious workplace, whether we are talking about businesses themselves and their performance or individual employees and their welfare. I hope that the guidance will enable us to move forward on that basis and

provide everyone involved with greater clarity on the current situation in Northern Ireland.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Labour Relations Agency Code of Practice on Time Off for Trade Union Duties and Activities be approved.

Private Members' Business

Educational Assistance for Young People

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the motion and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and published on the Marshalled List. The proposer will have 10 minutes in which to propose the amendment and five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes the good work being done by further education colleges, as well as by schools; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to establish a working group, comprising officials from the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the South Eastern Regional College and the PSNI to identify ways of improving access to further education for young people experiencing health, social and housing problems by addressing any barriers that exist in these areas.

At the outset, I wish to say that we accept the Alliance Party amendment. It has been the policy of successive governments to increase the number of young people with access to training and education post-16 years of age. It is recognised that not only does the young person benefit from undertaking such training but communities benefit from an enhanced skills base that can aid economic recovery and growth.

It is my contention that although much work has been done by various agencies and educational institutions, the time has now come for a more joined-up approach to tackling the barriers that still exist to our young people achieving their full potential and contributing effectively to the economy. Many reports cite statistic after statistic on the nature of the barriers that young people face when attempting to fulfil their academic and vocational potential.

The reasons for disengagement and low achievement are varied. They range from poverty and deprivation, to being in our care system, to getting involved in crime. Therefore, it is

important that all agencies that have an interest in addressing those issues, or a statutory duty to help to reduce them, are involved in creating any possible solutions.

It is important to remember that in the vast majority of cases, young people do not face one barrier in isolation. Very often, a number of barriers are present. It is also the case that, at times, one barrier can lead to another. Often, young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) after compulsory education has ended will not be the first in their family to have disengaged. Often, the legacy of failure to fulfil potential is not down to lack of ambition but to numerous factors, which then become a self-fulfilling prophecy for a young person.

It is often said that the early years are the most important in an individual's life. Often, lessons and beliefs gained in those formative years remain with us throughout life, and, for some, factors can impact on our health and other outcomes. Poverty in those early years can have a dramatic impact on a person's educational outcome post-16.

In the first years of primary school, the basic rules of literacy and numeracy are taught. If children fall behind at that level and the issue is not addressed, there is a good chance that they will never catch up, and that can have an impact on their educational outcome.

The 2006 'Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland' report found that in the first four years of primary school, children living in deprived areas attained lower scores in numeracy and literacy and made less progress than those from more affluent areas. Although attempts are made to address that barrier through reading recovery and maths recovery programmes, limited funding means that schools have to assess who is most in need, and some children may miss out.

The home learning environment was also highlighted in the report. The partnership between the school and children's parents/guardians is vital. How children are brought up to regard education and training will help to develop their goals and ambitions. Parents who have negative experiences of learning or are stressed about poverty and unemployment may be less likely to engage with their child or the school.

It has been found that many children raised in households in which there are long periods of unemployment internalise that environment and are more likely than children of working households to end up on benefits.

The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust also discovered the link between children living in poverty and low academic achievement. In the current economic situation, in which more people have to live on reduced incomes, the issue needs to be addressed in a positive way. If we can engage positively with our young people, we may be able to break the cycle.

Young people with mental health issues are also a vulnerable group who are at risk of underachieving. Barnardo's recently conducted a study that found that of a group of young people who are currently or who have recently been identified as NEET, nearly one quarter indicated that their special educational needs, learning difficulties or disabilities had prevented them from achieving at school. The two most common conditions were dyslexia and attention deficit disorder. From speaking to constituents in my area, I am aware that many fear that proposed changes to the way in which statements of special educational needs will be developed will mean that children in the future will not be able to achieve their full potential. Learning difficulties mean that an individual can be at risk from exclusion, underachievement and poor outcomes, including offending. The barrier that learning difficulties and disabilities proves to be to an individual throughout their learning lifetime has long been known, and it is important that, as elected representatives, we develop, in accordance with all stakeholders in the area, a strategy that can help individuals to become the best that they can be.

It is important that the Assembly, with all statutory and voluntary and community sector agencies, helps to mitigate the impact of adverse home life situations. An unsustainable home life can affect the resilience and emotional health of young people, which has an impact on their educational outcomes.

Research shows that a child's emotional health at the age of 10 is a key factor in determining mental health at the age of 16 and life chances at the age of 20. Action for Children's research shows a distinct lack of activity for children between the ages of six and 13 to develop good emotional health. Having poor emotional health,

which often manifests itself through low self-esteem, makes the years between the ages of six and 13 the most important element. That is the age range when bullying and peer pressure come into play, and children can also have their first exposure to substances that are open to abuse. Combining those issues with family factors, poverty and deprivation may mean that children from such backgrounds who are already marginalised may experience a greater barrier to those positive educational and training outcomes. Research shows that some children regress in academic standards during the first two years of secondary school, with a well-documented dip in attainment, and emotional well-being scores also significantly dipping. We must all work together to help to promote good emotional health and to teach our young people that emotional health is as important as physical health.

Those are just some of the barriers to further education that young people in Northern Ireland society face in continuing their education. Some Departments have put in place a number of schemes to address those barriers. The essential skills provision and the subsequent media campaign aim to raise levels of numeracy, ICT and literacy, not only for young people who have disengaged from the learning environment but for adults. That is important. If we can encourage parents to return to get essential skills, that sends a positive message to their children and to young people that training and education have a value for them.

The South Eastern Regional College has developed a programme designed specifically to encourage disengaged adults and young people back to a learning and training environment. Adults entering those courses can help to break the cycle of poor achievement and the failure, for some people in this economy, to maximise their potential.

It is imperative that all agencies that have an interest in increasing achievement work together to develop co-ordinated programmes that will help to address the issues and barriers to achievement that many people in Northern Ireland live with. The programmes, coupled with financial packages such as the education maintenance allowance (EMA), mean that those from the most economically disadvantaged backgrounds may be encouraged to remain in education or training. However, for a large number of people who are in receipt of certain

benefits or who live in hostels with inflexible hours, no amount of attractive educational programmes, training packages or small EMAs will be able to entice them into education and training. For that group of young people and adults, it is important to find a solution that will remove those barriers and give them the financial ability to live and study or ensure that they are not in danger of being on the streets should they try to increase their knowledge or skills. Lessons learned from people who survive on benefits show a reluctance to enter into short-term schemes with no discernible outcomes.

For example, programmes that place people in employment for short periods of time for a slight increase in their benefits, but with no prospects of a proper job at the end, serve only to alienate those already disengaged by seemingly reinforcing the belief that it does not matter what training or job expertise a person has, there are no full-time jobs.

The financial cost of any working group and the cost of any programmes identified will be offset by the saving and income that will come from Northern Ireland raising the level of skills on offer to potential investors. We cannot stand idly by and watch the gap between those with positive educational outcomes and those who disengage continue to grow. Action is needed to ensure that every young person in Northern Ireland has the ability and opportunity to become the best that they can.

12.00 noon

Mr Lyttle: I beg to move the following amendment. Leave out all after “working group,” and insert

“as part of a wider delivery mechanism to support the forthcoming Executive strategy for young people not in employment, education or training, comprising officials from the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, all further education colleges and the PSNI, to identify ways of improving access to further education for young people experiencing a range of personal and social barriers.”

I welcome the support for the amendment. The need for the Assembly to respond to the issue in a co-ordinated and effective way cannot be overstated. The most recent Labour Force Survey showed that 48,000 of our young people could be classified as being not in education, employment or training. That figure is one that we have heard in the House before and one that, I am sure, everyone would agree is deeply

worrying, considering the ongoing economic forecasts.

As the Employment and Learning Committee inquiry into NEETs recommended in 2010, any strategy for Northern Ireland should be based on structures that cement partnership, co-operation and co-ordination between all Executive Departments, other agencies and bodies and stakeholder groups, including the business community, schools, universities and colleges. The report made it clear that a multiagency and cross-departmental approach has to become the accepted way to work if we are to tackle this issue but also that individual bodies should provide oversight of the development and implementation of the strategy. The Committee report suggested that OFMDFM would be the Department best placed to perform that role. To that end, the Employment and Learning Committee inquiry advocated that the core of any NEETs strategy must involve Executive Departments looking beyond their own remit towards greater collaboration, along with community and voluntary groups, which can also be guilty, at times, of focusing on their own important challenges and not regarding themselves as part of a wider framework in which they engage and share work with others. A joined-up approach is, therefore, essential in this area.

I believe that the Alliance Party's amendment to the motion is to be supported. It makes it clear that the establishment of any working group containing all the stakeholders mentioned should look to improve access to further education for young people with social barriers but that must be integrated into a wider delivery mechanism, supporting a full Executive approach to the delivery of the NEETs strategy.

The work that colleges do in this regard should be recognised. Schemes such as Training for Success, Essential Skills and Skills for Work have helped give young people the skills needed to break into the workplace. In addition, we should recognise the advice and encouragement colleges provide in recruiting young people to their institutions and the hard-working staff in those organisations.

Mr F McCann: We have sat down as a party and discussed the amendment, but it is difficult to support it. Everything that it says is right, with the exception that you are asking us to support

an amendment before people have had sight of the Executive strategy for young people —

Mr Speaker: Can the Member turn to the mic so that the whole House can hear?

Mr F McCann: Sorry. I am just raising the point that it is difficult to support the amendment when people have not had sight of the Executive strategy for young people, which is the total emphasis of the amendment.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for that intervention. The strategy referred to is the NEETs strategy, on which consultative work has been completed.

Mr F McCann: It does not say that.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Lyttle: Well, that is the strategy being referred to.

We should recognise the good work being done in colleges. Recently, I attended the South Eastern Regional College and saw first-hand on that visit the exceptional work being done in this area. The NRC and the BMC have been awarded the Frank Buttle Trust charter mark for innovative, proactive work in helping young people from a care background gain access to further and higher education. The colleges' good work is to be recognised, and it was highlighted in a recent evidence session to the Committee, which confirmed that our colleges deliver education and training to one in three of all 16- to 17-year-old school leavers involved in partnerships at local learning community level.

Colleges have a very important part to play. I agree with the call in the motion to improve access to further education for young people facing multiple barriers, and I encourage the House to support the motion, as amended, and, indeed, the positive collaboration that is needed to improve education, training and employment outcomes for young people in Northern Ireland.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): With the Speaker's permission, I will speak for a few minutes as Chair, and then I will offer some points on an individual basis.

First, the Committee is greatly exercised by the plight of people who are NEET. In fact, the amendment and the motion mention that there has been a report. We have looked to see what we can do. Sadly, we do not seem to have

been able to make much of an impression on that. The Committee brought a motion to the Assembly to urge people to make sure that this is not missed off the agenda. No doubt the Minister will take an opportunity to reflect on that.

Secondly, there is the overall issue of the skills agenda. We need to make sure that, whatever structures come out in the future, we have some interaction on how we develop a skills agenda that people will buy into. The most compelling problem, I think, is that the people whom we are most keen to get hold of are those who are least interested in schooling or in getting skills, potentially because of challenges in the parental home or some other societal issues. That is why it is interesting from a Committee point of view that we look at having a joined-up approach on the matter. The Committee welcomes the House's debate on this important issue, but we are not sure what the future structures will be to take it forward.

I will make a few observations now as an MLA and a member of the Committee nevertheless. It is interesting that the motion highlights the South Eastern Regional College. I am not sure why one college in particular is identified, although, of course, it has a significant campus in Lisburn. All the colleges that I am aware of do really good work in this area. It seems to me that the motion has, perhaps, drifted a wee bit from its original intention. The colleges are particularly adept at looking after students who are in their care. They bring forward pastoral care. The real challenge here is to make sure that people who go to college do not drop out. There are multiple challenges for young people; everything from teenage pregnancies to trouble at home to somebody melting their head. There are real issues.

I had occasion to go to the Southern Regional College to have explained to me the system that it has. I have to tell you, Mr Speaker, that I was completely surprised and in awe of the amount of work that the dedicated staff do. They check attendances and make sure that people turn up. If they do not turn up, they want to know why. I think some of them might even go beyond their remit a wee bit and phone people at home and ask them why they are not going to be in college. That attitude makes the difference for all the colleges, and it should be built on. However, there is an issue before that, and I think the Member who moved the motion mentioned it. When you look at NEETs,

you can see that the key issue is that the most fundamental stage for disengagement is when the young person is aged between 14 and 16. You can see that the majority of people stop going to school at that stage. In fact, my colleague Mr Roy Beggs identified that there are about four or five wards in Northern Ireland with absence rates in excess of 40%. The simple fact is this: if you do not go to school, there is nothing the school can do about it. We need to find ways of identifying those people and how we might engage with them.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member agree that a lot more needs to be done in the early years with regard to prevention so that the colleges are not spending their money and resources on providing basic literacy and numeracy skills to our young people? Does he agree that the education system fails far too many of our children?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr B McCrea: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I know that, when Mrs Kelly was Chair of the Committee, she would have looked at this, and I have no doubt that she will make a contribution to the debate. We do not have time to cover the whole issue in five minutes. However, I can roll it back to say that we need to get engagement at as early an age as possible. Teachers at nursery schools can identify children — even those at the age of four — who are likely to struggle throughout the rest of their life. The key point that we should look at is that there are very many areas where young people touch our organisations, be they the PSNI, nurseries, schools or some other organisation, and yet we do not seem to pick them up in some form of safety net. That is the key issue that we want to address.

I will not detain the House because I know that other Members want to speak. However, there is a key issue: if we are going to remove DEL, that does not remove the need to concentrate on the issues that the Department is focusing on, particularly skills, our young people and those who are not in education, employment or training. Those areas need some type of formal assessment and some way of bringing things together. I am not sure what that structure should be, but I am absolutely clear that we need some sort of structure or those people will be consigned to the waste bin.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The motion says most of the right words about how we improve access to

further education for young people who, because of social factors, find barriers in their way. Although I have no problem with the formation of a working group to deal with the issue, I have a problem with the restrictive nature of the motion. For one, it excludes the Department of Education. Most of what has been said in the debate has referred to the underachievement of young people, the educational attainment of 14- to 16-year-olds, and people opting out of education. That all has to do with the Department of Education, and the motion does not state what role it should play.

If the proposer of the motion had explained the logic behind it, I might have understood the rationale behind why the south-eastern region was the only area mentioned in it. I say that not because I believe that that area does not need attention focused on it but because I represent an area that has a serious housing shortage, major health problems and crime statistics that are mind-blowing. It also has serious problems with young people of 11 years and over who have opted out of the system, which, I may add, has let them down.

I recently presented certificates to young people in their mid-teens who had tapped into a vibrant community network in the area. Those young people had been let down by the system, but the local community education project saw the potential in those young people and helped them through courses. At the end of those courses, they received the equivalent of GCSEs.

I also attended meetings with DSD and DEL. We came together to discuss their proposals to cut grants to a local group that has provided training for hundreds of people, young and old, over several years. The reason given to the group was not that it provided poor training — in fact, the opposite was the case — but that the Departments believed the training could be provided by one of the formal training agencies. In an attempt to deny the local community training organisation that minor funding, they denied people who had dropped out of the system the opportunity to get the training they required to at least put them on a level playing field when searching for work. I explained to DSD and DEL that most of the people who attended the course ranged from their late teens to their 40s. The difficulties being placed in the way by Departments are fairly typical. They are inflexible and adopt a teacher/pupil approach to the delivery of resources and services.

The people who attended those courses will probably just drop off the chart. Who will be the losers? I have to say that it will be all of us.

As a new member of the Employment and Learning Committee, I have listened to officials speak about those not in education, employment or training. The very groups that I have mentioned were set up to help those NEETs. The area where that took place is one of the most socially deprived in the North, and it comes top in almost all the barometers of poverty and social deprivation. I would have no difficulty supporting the formation of a working group if it were widened to take in other areas of the North and not selectively zero in on one area. I agree that education is the key for young people, but training also has a major part to play in preparing people for employment.

12.15 pm

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I will be happy to cover the points in my own comments later on, but it may be helpful at this stage to stress that the Department of Education is central to the development of any strategy around NEETs. My Department may well lead on that, but we do so on behalf of a number of Departments, and the Department of Education is central. Placing the framework of the motion within the context of what the Executive will do about NEETs and wider activities around children and young people will hopefully address the concerns that the Member has and ensure that it is an inclusive process and all the right people are at the table.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute added to his time.

Mr F McCann: I appreciate what the Member has said, but the fact is that the Department of Education has been left out of the amendment. Nobody has stood up and said why. Most of the debate this morning has taken place around young people between the ages of 14 and 16, who fit in to the brief of the Department of Education.

Mr Lyttle: I appreciate the request for clarification. The amendment aims to ensure that every relevant Department and the full remit of colleges are included. The amendment states:

“as part of a wider delivery mechanism to support the forthcoming Executive strategy for young people not in employment, education or training”.

That wider delivery mechanism, of course, includes the Department of Education as a key delivery partner — *[Interruption]*. Well, there are other Departments that are not listed.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us not have a debate across the Chamber. Allow the Member to continue.

Mr Lyttle: I hope that that clarifies the issue: the wider delivery mechanism includes the Education Department.

Mr F McCann: It quite clearly does not include the Department of Education, and I am asking why. What I have got up to now is excuses.

If we are serious about bringing down the barriers that stop people accessing further education, we also need to look at how policies are delivered from within Departments. It is not good enough to say that there are health, social and housing reasons that prohibit young people from taking up education or training. Did we ever think that the people who deliver the policies may also have got it wrong? Any working group needs to have a holistic approach that covers external and internal procedures, with recommendations to put it right. This is in no way a criticism of further education colleges. I know many young people who have attained the skills and education to move on to employment.

We cannot look at these issues without mentioning the impact that welfare reform legislation will have.

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

Mr F McCann: The Housing Rights Service has predicted a huge rise in repossessions, and many other young people will be affected by the introduction of the shared room allowance.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr F McCann: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I should have had an extra two minutes there.

Mr P Ramsey: The SDLP welcomes the motion and the amendment. The early part of the motion refers to further education colleges, and I think the contribution that the colleges in Northern Ireland make in the development of young people across all sectors is clear.

For the record, I understand Members raising the issue of young people not in education, employment or training. It has exercised the minds of members of the Employment and Learning Committee for a considerable time

now, as the Chair said. We get frustrated and angry with departmental officials because of the slowness of the process for bringing forward the strategic objectives and plan that the Minister referred to. I am aware that he intends to brief the Committee over the next two weeks.

I think it is reasonable, on the point made by Fra McCann, not to name the Department of Education. The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister is not named either. It has a clear role around children and young people. The spirit of the motion is that there is a need. We had robust exchanges last week with departmental officials about the dozens of cross-departmental collaborative groups that are in motion, but it has taken a long time for this Department to formalise an Executive approach in dealing with young people not in education, employment or training.

Mr B McCrea: Does the Member agree that it is important that the views expressed by the Committee are taken on board by the Executive and the Minister, about both NEETs and the development of a skills strategy?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an added minute.

Mr P Ramsey: I agree totally with the Member; his initial comments were right. The NEETs issue has exercised every member of the Employment and Learning Committee for the past two years, under the stewardship of the current Chairman and under my colleague Dolores Kelly before that. The Committee carried out an exhaustive inquiry into NEETs. We went on study visits to look at models of best practice, not just in Northern Ireland but in Wales and Scotland.

I get angry maybe not so much with the Minister but with the Department for not coming forward or being seen to come forward with a mechanism enabling young people to have a greater role in society. I just do not see it, Minister, I really do not. We had a debate on the subject here two or three weeks ago in which Members from every party participated. However, the Minister made no reference to any of the contributions made by Members. He came in with a prepared script. We still await the Minister's strategy, although I understand that we will get it.

I feel that, at times, we collectively — I say this as a criticism of ourselves — let young people down, both as a group and individually. We saw the NEETs scoping study. There is a common

factor running through that and many variables in every case. Other Members referred to that, and I can understand Fra getting uptight.

The proposer of the motion spoke well about primary school and post-primary school. Although it is necessary for the Minister for Employment and Learning to lead on the matter — he must take a much stronger lead than at present — other Departments such as DE, DHSSPS, DSD and OFMDFM need to come forward. The Committee heard from Include Youth and other groups about how marginalised young people are when they come out of care or prison. It is necessary, therefore, to involve other statutory agencies, which is why the PSNI was also referenced.

The issues have to be dealt with through a clearly defined, objective cross-departmental approach, but that has not happened. Why has it not happened, Minister? The Department has stated its intention to set it up, but when will it be set up? The Department has the lead on it. We get so frustrated. The Committee spent time exhaustively putting together an inquiry. This is the third time within a short period that NEETs has been discussed in the Chamber, but we do not see any action plan coming out the other end. The Minister may say later that he needs to discuss that with the Executive first, but he must come to the House and explain his intention to all of us.

Over 40,000 young people across Northern Ireland are not in education, employment or training. With welfare reform coming in, a further tsunami of young people who may be caught in a benefits culture will be forced to seek employment, education or training. What is being done? Tens of thousands of people are migrating from social security to employment and learning programmes. It is important that the Minister shares with us his intentions and says how he will facilitate young people and help them to become more active in a training or work environment.

Mr Douglas: I support the motion and the amendment. As our motion states, the issue also concerns the work of further education colleges. It is important to mention the excellent work of colleges such as Belfast Metropolitan College, which our Committee visited. I was a wee bit surprised that those colleges were not mentioned.

The motion also mentions ways of:

“improving access to further education for young people”.

One of the Assembly's most encouraging initiatives and debates was on fuel poverty. We brought together the Chairs of all Committees and a range of people to look at fuel poverty cross-departmentally. The consensus was that that was a good example of people coming together and doing something about fuel poverty. Hopefully, that will continue. Our Chair, Basil McCrea, mentioned the plight —

Mr McCartney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Douglas: Certainly.

Mr McCartney: Given the example of the fuel poverty initiative bringing all the Departments together, does the Member accept that the motion and the amendment are lacking, in that they do not mention the Department of Education?

Mr Speaker: The Member has a minute added to his time.

Mr Douglas: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

That is an important issue and is certainly something that we need to look at. The fuel poverty initiative brought the key people together. I think that that is what you are saying: key people are missing from this. Maybe we should look at that.

The Chair, Basil McCrea, talked about the plight of the most disadvantaged and most vulnerable young people in our community. If this debate is about anything, it is about recognising young people, particularly the most vulnerable in our community. Let me just quote a young person who took part in an Include Youth initiative. I feel that this really sums up today's debate. Kelly, aged 20, said:

“I was 12 when I went into foster care, 14 when I went into a children's home, 17 when my father died and 19 when my mum died. In 2010, I got involved with the Give and Take scheme” —

we do not support that scheme, which is another issue that I will come to —

“and it was the best thing I have ever done, because, for me, I learned a lot about the type of person I want to be and the type of person I am capable of being.”

What a statement. If we are about anything, it is about bringing that out in young people. She went on to say:

“The incentive of EMA would have been ideal for me as it would have driven me more. Why is it because I’m in care I was dubbed ‘not worthy?’” —

that is a terrible indictment of us: a young person dubbed “not worthy” and made to feel such —

“That’s why I started the Give and Take scheme to prove that just because you are in care doesn’t mean you’re not as important as everyone else.”

Prevocational schemes, such as Give and Take, are not eligible for weekly non-means-tested education maintenance allowance. I know that we have raised the issue with the Minister and in Committee. Of course there are financial constraints. However, I would say that the most vulnerable in our community are the first people we should look at when talking about those types of scheme. It is not just about widespread schemes and education. For me, it is very much about coming together and taking a co-ordinated approach.

There are discussions at NICVA today about the welfare reform programme that is being handed down by the Westminster Government. We all know that that is coming down the track and that it will have a major negative impact on many of the most vulnerable communities. The frustrating thing is that we can do very little about most of it, although we may be able to change and adapt some of it. We have an opportunity today, because we have it in our power to do something for our young people, particularly the most vulnerable. For me, this is about getting some sort of consensus on working together with the Minister. I certainly agree with Basil McCrea on this: with the dissolution of DEL, we should make sure that this is part of the legacy for any future Department. How we treat the most vulnerable in our community is how we will be judged by society now and when it comes to election time.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet immediately upon the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. We will then return to the debate, when the next Member to speak will be Barry McElduff.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.29 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 7, 8 and 10 have been withdrawn. Written answers are required.

Prison Service: Enhanced Severance

1. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the terms and conditions of enhanced severance for prison officers.

(AQO 1476/11-15)

Mr Ford (The Minister of Justice): The Civil Service compensation scheme is the statutory scheme that sets out the terms and conditions for benefits that are payable to civil servants who leave on grounds of redundancy or severance. The scheme’s provisions include the immediate payment of pension; the immediate payment of the lump sum; and the immediate payment of lump sum compensation. Both the pension and the lump sum may be enhanced if the member leaves before their retirement age under the principal civil service pension scheme. In addition, the Prison Service agreed to pay compensation in lieu of notice up to a maximum of six months and an additional payment of nine months’ basic salary.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he confirm that it is lawful, ethical and desirable that his Department inserts as a condition of severance that those prison officers who will be awarded very generous golden handshakes under the scheme will not be eligible to reapply for jobs in the Prison Service? Will he bring forward regulations to prevent that from happening?

Mr Ford: I note Mr McMullan’s concern and, indeed, that of other Members. I can simply advise him that the legal advice that I have received is that it would be discriminatory to prevent any of those who leave from applying for the new jobs that were advertised and for which the closing date was last week. I can, however, confirm that in the face of very significant potential recruitment, not one of the

151 officers who will leave service on 31 March 2012 was among around 5,000 applicants for the new posts.

Mr B McCrea: Minister, following the departure of Colin McConnell from his position of director general, can you outline how that will affect the staff exit scheme? Will you take the opportunity to explain how you intend to mitigate the loss of the person who was setting up the entire reform of the Prison Service?

Mr Ford: The answer to the question of how Colin McConnell's move to Edinburgh will affect the scheme is that it will not affect it in any way at all. Colin McConnell played a vital part in setting the foundations for the reform programme, which, as the House will know, follows through on the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme and builds on the recommendations of the Owers team report. I want simply to pay tribute to the work that Colin McConnell did to establish that. The fact that he served so well that he was selected for, effectively, the second most senior post in prisons in the United Kingdom to return to the Scottish Prison Service — a service that is three times bigger than ours and is based in his native Edinburgh — should come as no surprise to those who have seen the good work that Colin has done. However, another team is available of people who are also doing work. Reform was not being driven entirely by Colin McConnell. I have no doubt that when I discuss the arrangements for the appointment of a new director general with the permanent secretary, we will ensure that that post is filled as soon as possible in a way that will enable the current team to continue its work.

Mr A Maginness: I am not so certain that the departure of Mr McConnell, who is a very good man, is not anything other than a blow to reform. Given that the exit scheme is oversubscribed substantially, with over 500 applicants, how will the Minister manage the scheme over the next year or two?

Mr Ford: As I said earlier, 151 of the 544 applicants will be able to leave the service at the end of the month. Other moves will have to be managed in accordance with service's operational needs as replacement staff in the new grades come into post. It will be an issue for the Prison Service to manage suitable numbers of staff leaving as suitable numbers are brought into post. I cannot give the operational details

of that at this stage. However, I assure the House that it will be managed in a way that will provide adequate staffing to ensure that the three prisons operate properly.

Mr S Anderson: All prison officers were told that they would be allowed to leave the service with respect and dignity, yet over 300 officers have been told that their leaving date is still under consideration. I know that the Minister has touched on it, but when will he be able to provide some certainty for those officers and give them a leaving date? Many have been left devastated —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr S Anderson: When will the Minister be able to give those officers a leaving date? They have been left devastated by the mismanagement of that scheme from the very beginning.

Mr Ford: It is easy to talk about the mismanagement of the scheme from the beginning. I believe that officers were told that they would be able to leave with dignity, and they are able to leave with dignity. Anyone who suggested that we could allow 544 prison officers to walk out of the gate on the same date, on 31 March, really did not grasp the reality of the situation. A total of 151 officers will leave in March. The others will be told what their leaving date is as soon as they can be told so as to maintain the operational necessities of the service.

Prisons: Full-body Searches

2. **Mr Doherty** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the recent research carried out into full-body searching. (AQO 1477/11-15)

Mr Ford: The review of full-body imaging examined a number of areas, including the range of equipment and systems available; the manufacturers' performance claims; the threat profile that systems are designed to address; the application of systems in a prison environment; independent operational assessments of performance and safety; maintenance and training costs; and options for the use of technology to augment or replace full-body searching in some circumstances or entirely.

Mr Doherty: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that confidence can be placed in technology for airport security in places like Chicago, will the Minister explain why he has not yet moved

to introduce similar technology for prison security in order to make full-body searches obsolete?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Doherty for his supplementary question. The answer is that we continue to work on the issue as we can. There is a difference between people travelling through airports once and those who are in prison for a significant period and who would have the opportunity, if the operation were not conducted successfully, to smuggle small quantities of inappropriate substances and build something up. I am not sure whether the kinds of machines being used in Chicago airport or in other areas of the United States would be licensed for use, in any circumstances, in the European Union or the UK.

Mr Campbell: Given that the campaign for the use of full-body imaging in prisons appears to be gaining some traction, will the Justice Minister spell out the dangers that that full-body imaging is attempting to thwart? Will he also spell out the problems that are being faced in prisons across the UK, and particularly here, given the threat that is posed by some of those in the jails?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Campbell for his question. I think that we are all aware of the threats that are posed. There is no doubt that attempts are made to smuggle in a variety of contraband materials in prisons in every part of the UK. Drugs, explosives, imitation firearms and the opportunity to build up replicas have all featured in prisons across the UK in recent years. The reality is that unless we have a system that guarantees that the technology can detect all the varieties of threats, we will not be able to ensure safety and security in the prisons by moving away from full-body searching. Moving away from full-body searching was a recommendation of the Owers report, and I am committed to implementing it. However, that must be done on the basis of maintaining the safety and security of prisoners and prison staff.

Mr McCallister: Will the Minister outline whether similar schemes have been carried out in any prisons throughout the world? If so, how successful have they been?

Mr Ford: I am grateful to Mr McCallister for his question, although in asking me to examine the situation across the world, I think that he has given me slightly more responsibility than the House has. I am not aware of any use of technology that has averted the need for full-body searching anywhere in the United

Kingdom. As I informed the House previously, work is ongoing in a prison in Yorkshire on the opportunity to develop a technological solution. The Prison Service is keeping in touch with that work, and we are committed to seeing whether we can build on and use the lessons established by that research.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his replies so far. Will he acknowledge that the number one priority must be to continue to reduce the tension that exists, particularly in Roe House in Maghaberry prison? Will he report to the House on his most recent visit to Portlaoise prison and on the searching arrangements in that prison?

Mr Ford: I appreciate that Mr Ramsey has been looking at the options over the past months. I visited Portlaoise prison a few weeks ago, as I did Birmingham a few weeks before that, to see the way in which searches are carried out. There are differences between the Portlaoise system and the system that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has, not least the presence of a company-strength detachment of the Irish defence forces in Portlaoise prison. That is not something that would be acceptable in Northern Ireland. I will discuss the details of that review, alongside the technology review, when I meet senior Prison Service officials in the coming weeks.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I reluctantly remind Members to be brief and to focus on one question to the Minister.

PSNI: Managed Services Contract

3. **Mr Ó hOisín** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the discussions between his Department and the PSNI on the arrangements for financing and retendering the managed services contract for the PSNI. (AQO 1478/11-15)

Mr Ford: The PSNI submitted a business case for the supply of support services to my Department for approval in December 2011, as Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) approval is not required. The business case examines how the future delivery of the supply of support services to the PSNI will satisfy its existing and future operational needs. Existing support services provided through outsourcing include security guarding, CCTV monitoring, custody detention officers, driving services and call handling, among others. The preferred option is to contract for further support functions in addition to those, including safety camera

administration, fixed penalty processing, property management, courier services, and dispatch and controller services.

The value of the contract over the initial three years is £69.3 million, with, potentially, two further contract extensions of two years each. That is an increase above the current contract, which is valued at £42.3 million over the three-year term. My officials reviewed the business case and granted initial approval for the PSNI to advertise in the Official Journal on 2 February, while finalising conditions of approval. Business case approval was granted on 24 February, subject to certain conditions linking the project to the PSNI's efficiency savings programme.

Mr Ó hOisín: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. Will the Minister confirm that under the Police Act 1998, he has the authority to regulate such contracts? Given the huge public outcry over the rehiring of retired police officers, will he tell us what proportion of the £180 million that has been set aside will not go into that old boys' network?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Ó hOisín for his question. However, the role of the Department is to approve the business case on the grounds of value for money and affordability; it is not involved in policy. It is for the police to determine the policy. The Policing Board's resources and improvement committee receives regular updates on that business case. My Department does not interfere in the issue of how it is administered. That is a matter that lies solely within the responsibilities of the Police Service and the Chief Constable.

Mr Givan: Will the Minister congratulate what has been termed as the old boys' network for the work that it does to combat, specifically, dissident republicans and the terrorist campaign that they wish to wage? Will he comment on discussions that his Department has had with the police about strategic reserves and the need for the Police Service to have greater flexibility in how it manages its budget?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Givan for his question, but, as ever, I think that he is trying to encourage me to stray a little bit into the operational responsibilities of the police. My job is to support the resourcing of the police, not to run the Police Service. It is certainly not to interfere with the operational responsibilities of either the Chief Constable or the Policing Board. However, it is absolutely clear that the Police Service has a very difficult task to do at present in building

proper neighbourhood community policing, alongside the threat that it faces. We should support the PSNI as it carries out that work.

2.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members should not encourage the Minister to stray from the question.

Mr Nesbitt: I very much encourage the Minister to give me a direct answer to the question. He said that DFP approval was not required for the business case. What is his comment on that, and does that suggest that DFP approval is an unnecessary layer of bureaucracy?

Mr Ford: I really think that Mr Nesbitt should ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel that question. There are certain areas in which DFP approval is required for business cases, and there are certain other areas in which it is not required. It is not required in this case.

Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005

4. **Mr Elliott** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the original scope and extent of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005.

(AQO 1479/11-15)

Mr Ford: In 2004, the Government published a White Paper, 'One Step Ahead: A 21st Century Strategy to Defeat Organised Crime'. The Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 implemented the legislative proposals of the White Paper and established the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). The powers contained in the legislation were for use across all law enforcement agencies: the police, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, SOCA and the UK Border Agency.

The powers contained in the 2005 Act provide law enforcement with enhanced powers of confiscation in respect of the proceeds of crime investigations. They also provide for the use of financial reporting orders, which allow the courts to impose obligations on people convicted of specified offences to report the particulars of their financial affairs. The legislation also introduced a statutory framework for the use of assisting offenders.

Mr Elliott: Thank you, Minister, for that response. Obviously, the prosecution of serious crime is a complex operation, so does the Minister believe

that the legislation in place is sufficient to deal with it? If not, what does he propose to do about it?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Elliott for his supplementary question. It has not been suggested to me by any of the relevant agencies or the judiciary that there is any need to change the legislation, but, as ever, I remain open to suggestions from any quarter.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. The Minister said that none of the agencies has asked him to review the legislation. In light of the recent court case, about which, as the Minister knows, there is a lot of public concern, perhaps the time is now appropriate —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr McCartney: Sorry. Is the time now appropriate to review the legislation, given the concern of the McIlwaine family about the case that the Minister cited as a paragon of virtue?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney for his question. For the benefit of the House, that issue dominated a certain amount of my discussion with the Justice Committee last week. I accept that there are Members who are unhappy with anything that they regard as supergrass legislation. I believe that what we have under the 2005 Act is very different from what happened 30 years ago. There is a clear process whereby assisting offenders are identified, prosecuted and receive an appropriately reduced sentence before proceedings are taken against others. There is also the opportunity for cases to be referred back to the courts if it is felt that assisting offenders have failed to live up to their obligations under their signed contract. It was made absolutely clear by the Director of Public Prosecutions that he has asked a senior lawyer to examine the most recent trial to determine whether the Stewart brothers complied with their obligation to give honest evidence in that case. He has made it clear that he will follow up on that, as is his responsibility.

Mr Eastwood: May I press you a bit further, Minister, given the recent controversy that Members have spoken about before? Will you detail your conversations or meetings with any of the other agencies to look at potential reform?

Mr Ford: Since the court judgement to which Mr Eastwood refers, I have had a telephone

conversation with the director. I have not discussed the issue with other agencies, but I have made it clear publicly that I am open to representation from any of them. Indeed, I have made it clear publicly that had there been anything in the judgement of the court that day, I would have been open to considering the legislation. Similarly, if the Justice Committee or any other body in this House were to put forward proposals, I would examine them seriously.

Multiagency Risk Assessment Conferences Operational Group

5. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the work of the multiagency risk assessment conference operational group since its inaugural meeting in September 2011.

(AQO 1480/11-15)

Mr Ford: MARACs have been in place now for just over two years, and I believe that they have achieved a considerable amount. From their inception until the end of January this year, the 14 MARACs across Northern Ireland discussed 2,990 high-risk cases, and safety plans were put in place to protect the victims, which also involved 4,187 children.

The MARAC operational group was established on 26 September last year to ensure that a high standard of practice and a consistent approach were adopted in MARACs across Northern Ireland and to address practical delivery issues. It has met on three occasions since inception, and future meetings will be held at least quarterly.

Membership covers all key organisations involved in the strategic and operational side of MARAC. A wide range of issues have been discussed to date at the MARAC operational group meetings, which are chaired by the local domestic violence partnerships. However, I am conscious that some work remains to be implemented, and the representation at the operational group by policy officials maintains the link between the operational group and the strategic groups that have overall oversight of the MARAC initiative.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his reply. I also thank him for his help with the issues that I have brought to him on a regular basis, particularly this one. One of my concerns that he is well aware of is that even though we have had the establishment of the MARACs, the information-sharing protocol has still not been

put in place. Does the Minister not feel that having that operational protocol in place is key to the delivery of this set of circumstances so that it can be of help and assistance to MARACs in that much-needed process for victims?

Mr Ford: It is nice to have the opportunity to thank a Member for his question and, indeed, his comments of support for the work of the Department. I will make the most of it; it does not happen often at Question Time.

Mr Storey asked specifically about the information-sharing agreement. That issue has been complex and has taken some detail to follow through. The Police Service has been taking the lead on that, and it is my understanding that the finalisation of that document is now with the MARAC operational group, so I hope that we will be able to give him a very definite answer in the near future.

Mr Copeland: If possible, can the Minister please give me an update on his assessment of the work of the independent domestic violence advisers (IDVAs) in Northern Ireland?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Copeland for his question. Unfortunately, he has managed to put his finger on an area where progress has not been as rapid as we had hoped. The development of the business case for IDVAs has been more problematic than was at first anticipated by the funders, and there has been an examination of the existing policies across the UK to see how to make the best use of them in Northern Ireland. We are now at the stage where a procurement exercise is being taken forward together by the funding agencies, which are my Department, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Police Service.

Mr McDevitt: I join Mr Storey in acknowledging the great opportunity that MARACs present for tackling issues and putting in place support for vulnerable children. However, will the Minister acknowledge that progress is not as speedy as it should be on the full implementation of MARACs and that it is not just the information protocols or the specific officers who Mr Copeland referred to that are still outstanding? Can the Minister assure the House that he will take a personal interest at Executive level in trying to unblock some of the unnecessary bureaucratic blockages —

Mr Deputy Speaker: One question please.

Mr McDevitt: — that have emerged?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister has been asked two questions; he can choose which one he answers.

Mr Ford: In fairness, Mr McDevitt makes a serious point, and I endeavoured in my initial response to Mr Storey to make it clear that although I believe that MARACs have been a positive story, they have not been perhaps as speedy as we would have hoped and there have been operational difficulties in bringing together the different agencies. I can, however, give him a commitment that the issue of ensuring that MARACs work well is a priority for my Department and for me, and I will ensure that we manage the system as well as we can in the future. Given the difficult issues that MARACs have to deal with and given the complexity of the arrangements between different agencies, we are committed in the Department of Justice to ensuring that they work as well as they possibly can.

Rural Crime

6. **Mr Swann** asked the Minister of Justice what action he is taking to tackle the problem of rural crime. (AQO 1481/11-15)

Mr Ford: The forthcoming community safety strategy will support efforts to make rural communities safer through preventing and reducing rural crime. At a local level, community safety partnerships deliver initiatives in rural areas across Northern Ireland that contribute to the reduction of crime, fear of crime and antisocial behaviour. Examples of initiatives to prevent and reduce rural crime include neighbourhood watch and rural watch schemes, trailer-marking schemes, data tagging for trailer quad marking, farmer text message schemes and crime prevention advice to rural groups.

A number of events and initiatives have been held in the Member's constituency of North Antrim, including, for example, a number of trailer-marking sessions, including in Ballymoney, Moyle and Ballymena, with another scheduled for Ballymoney later this month; a number of Construction and Agricultural Equipment Security and Registration (CESAR) tractor security-marking events across the entire North Antrim area, and another one is scheduled for Ballymoney in early April; farmer text-message schemes across the Moyle district; and a rural crime seminar held

recently by police in H district in Garvagh to discuss rural crime and rural networks.

Just last week, I met the sector inspector in Ballymoney, and I heard at first hand about some of the rural crime initiatives being taken there, including an initiative called Farm Gate, which involves neighbourhood policing teams calling with farmers to glean useful information about involvement in rural crime and to provide crime prevention advice and reassurance to the farming community.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for his answer. He obviously did his homework before coming. In relation to Farm Gate, which involves police officers taking anecdotal evidence from individual farmers, what judicial use will that be, should they come up with useful information?

Mr Ford: Mr Swann raises a perfectly reasonable question. I am glad that he acknowledges that I did my homework, although I do it for other people as well. The reality is that the police have to act on a variety of information, some of which is intelligence of a quality suitable for criminal prosecution and some of which may simply help to build an information case that can be followed through. That is an operational decision for the police. The key issue in this case is active work by the local neighbourhood teams, engaging with farmers and addressing some of the concerns that have been current in recent weeks.

Mr G Robinson: Does the Minister agree that the possible closure of some rural police stations, namely, in Dungiven and Garvagh in my constituency, could impact on possible fear of crime?

Mr Ford: Mr Robinson addresses the fact that there may be an issue of fear of crime. What Members need to do is address the reality of rural crime. Rural crime is not dealt with by having police officers sitting behind desks. Rural crime is addressed by the work that the Chief Constable has done in the past year or so, putting 600 officers out on the streets in response teams and neighbourhood teams. That is the best way of achieving it. Of course, the decision as to which stations are required for operational reasons is for the Chief Constable, and the decision on disposal of unused stations is one for the Policing Board.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister not recognise that the present proposal for the wholesale closure of rural police stations is sending out the wrong message — a message of encouragement to

the perpetrators of rural crime and a message of discouragement to their victims? Having officers stationed behind a desk 20 or 30 miles away is little comfort to those who are the subject of the present outbreak.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Could we have the question, please?

Mr Allister: Does he not agree that having officers stationed 20 or 30 miles away behind a desk is a source of great annoyance and discomfort to the victims of those crimes?

Mr Ford: I think the greatest comfort we can have for our people is that which I highlighted earlier — the Chief Constable putting 600 officers out on the streets.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he recognise that rural crime is largely concentrated on the theft of tractors, diggers and farm machinery in general? Given that that is a major problem in parts of County Derry and County Tyrone, is any consideration being given to an expansion of the rural neighbourhood scheme?

2.30 pm

Mr Ford: I thank Mr Byrne for what is an entirely reasonable question, but it is not an issue for me as Minister, although I understand that the issue is being followed up actively by the police in a number of districts. That is why I highlighted, for example, the text messaging service that feeds into a neighbourhood watch scheme that is being administered in Moyle district. Where incidents arise or there are suspicions, the police have the capacity to inform a large number of rural dwellers by a simple text message to look out for issues of particular concern. That kind of thing shows good work and a different way of doing it in rural areas to what would have been a traditional neighbourhood watch in an urban or suburban area.

Regional Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1 and 3 have been withdrawn and require a written answer.

Conservation: Traffic Restrictions

2. **Mrs Hale** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the traffic restrictions that could be put in place under the Road Traffic Regulation (NI) Order 1997 to ensure that

the existing character of a road and adjacent historical properties is protected from heavy vehicular traffic. (AQO 1492/11-15)

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): My Department's Roads Service has advised that, under article 4 of the Road Traffic Regulation (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the Department may make an order that prevents the use of the public road by vehicular traffic of a kind or in a manner that is unsuitable having regard to the existing character of the road or adjoining property. However, my officials further advise that, when considering the introduction of a prohibition in respect of heavy vehicles, they must have due regard to the availability of a suitable alternative route and the potential impact on local businesses.

In practice, it has been found that, in many cases, no alternative route is deemed suitable for larger vehicles, for example, on narrow rural roads or residential streets. It has also been found that, on occasions, businesses that are located along the road may be wholly dependent on larger vehicles being able to access their premises directly for delivery or distribution purposes. Prohibiting such vehicles could prevent those businesses from operating. In addition, heavy traffic may already be using the most appropriate route, and, if diverted, issues associated with that traffic could transfer from one road to another. As a consequence, Roads Service generally explores other options that could lead to voluntary control, including the improvement of existing directional signage and the erection of additional advisory signage to guide large and heavy commercial vehicles away from the area; the establishment of a preferred route network for large heavy commercial vehicles; and seeking the co-operation of lorry operators and/or transport agencies with a view to reaching agreement on possible routes and times of operation.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he assure the House that, where roads and adjoining historical and listed buildings come under threat from heavy vehicular traffic of a certain kind, he will do all in his power to ensure that the appropriate means are put in place to preserve and protect those buildings from damage?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the honourable lady for her question. She has been in regular correspondence and meetings with me on the

issue, particularly in and around Hillsborough. I assure you that Roads Service will give every consideration to ameliorating and dealing with heavy vehicular traffic. She and other elected representatives for that area are aware of the particular and peculiar issues in respect of Hillsborough village. We continue to look at those issues to see what measures we can bring forward.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister have any plans to review criteria for all traffic-calming measures in built-up areas? I think specifically of small villages such as Kilskeery in County Tyrone.

Mr Kennedy: Kilskeery in County Tyrone has severe problems — *[Laughter.]* It has the honour of being represented by Mr McElduff, which is a disadvantage from the start. I need to be careful because there are cost implications of introducing such changes. There is a well-designated system by which traffic-calming measures are assessed. If the Member wishes to correspond with me directly to try to address the issues surrounding Kilskeery, I am happy to look at anything that we can do to improve the situation.

Mr Byrne: Is the Minister or the Department considering bringing in new speed restrictions, particularly in major towns that may have more pedestrians and cyclists than in the past?

Mr Kennedy: Traffic-calming cases are done on an individual area, town or village basis. My officials will actively look at whether improvements are necessary and at what stage we can bring them forward. I assure the Member that we are encouraging other modes of transport, including cycling and perhaps walking, to encourage people to lead a healthier lifestyle and to be less reliant on cars and vehicles.

Street Lighting Cables

4. **Mr McQuillan** asked the Minister for Regional Development what action his Department is taking to prevent the theft of street lighting cables, particularly in rural areas. (AQO 1494/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his question. The theft of street lighting cables is an abhorrent and dangerous activity that must be condemned by all right-thinking people. Contrary to the opinion of some, it is not a victimless crime, and it shows a flagrant disregard for elderly and other vulnerable individuals who are

likely to be inconvenienced when street lighting is not functioning. My Department's Roads Service is liaising closely with the PSNI to assist in the investigation of street lighting cable thefts, and I urge all members of the public with any information on such activities to bring it to the attention of the PSNI.

Roads Service has introduced measures aimed at combating this crime. Among the steps taken to date, it has changed the way new street lighting cables are laid to make them more difficult to steal. In addition, cables at certain locations have been marked with special smart DNA grease that allows stolen cables to be identified. Roads Service has also investigated the possible use of CCTV monitoring and remote alarm systems to protect cable installations. However, those options have proved to be prohibitively expensive for widespread use. My officials will continue to engage with the PSNI and take appropriate measures to prevent further cable thefts.

Mr McQuillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that it is a case of the sooner that legislation is brought forward to regulate scrap metal dealers and make it easier for the police to trace who is committing this heinous crime the better?

Mr Kennedy: That is a helpful suggestion that I am happy to take on board and on which, perhaps, I will consult Executive colleagues on how best to progress. It is unacceptable that so many such incidents — 76 separate incidents in total — have resulted in street lighting cable thefts. It is not a victimless crime, and anyone with any information should inform the PSNI. Roads Service officials will continue to work with the PSNI. The Member's suggestion is helpful, and I will explore methods of achieving it.

Mr Copeland: The Minister will be aware that not only cabling, but grills, manhole covers and anything that can be broken up, cut down or stolen is being removed. Does he agree that the wider issue of metal theft is a cross-cutting issue in the Executive? In light of that, will he — to echo what my colleague has just said — encourage the Environment Minister and the Justice Minister to consider legislating to make it easier to trace those involved in the business of stolen scrap metal —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Minister has got the gist of your question.

Mr Copeland: — and to reduce the potential for profit from dealing in stolen metal?

Mr Kennedy: The point has been amplified by the Member's comments, and I will seek to co-operate and liaise with Executive colleagues, initially through discussions. I can tell the House that the cost of replacing the stolen cables and repairing the associated damage is estimated to be in the region of £330,000, so it is a serious issue. The scrap value of the stolen cables is substantially less than the replacement costs. It represents a challenge, and I and my officials — I hope in conjunction with other Departments, Ministers and their officials — can look at measures to address all issues of theft. It is public property that is being stolen, and the taxpayer is expected to underwrite those costs.

Mr Eastwood: Can the Minister give us a geographical breakdown of the locations of the thefts? He mentioned a figure of 76: I could probably take him to 76 lamp posts in Derry that have been attacked. A geographical breakdown would be great.

Mr Kennedy: We will not ask for a DNA readout from the Member. That was a joke, by the way, just in case the Justice Minister is in any way interested.

There have been 76 cases, as I said, mostly in the northern and western divisions. There have been around 61 cases in the northern division of Roads Service and 15 in the western division. Clearly, it represents a serious challenge. I am happy to say that neither the eastern nor southern divisions have been affected to date. I am always cautious about giving out such information because it is not only law-abiding people who watch 'Stormont Live' or see these debates. It is an issue that we will concentrate on in the areas most affected at this point. Any assistance that the Member and his colleagues can give will be greatly appreciated.

A26 and Dungiven Bypass

5. **Mr G Robinson** asked the Minister for Regional Development whether he can give an assurance that an upgrade of the A26 and a decoupled Dungiven bypass will be included in his Department's business case for the development of roads. (AQO 1495/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: I can advise the Member that the business case for a major roads project is provided on an individual basis and evolves as

a scheme is developed. The final business case is normally compiled when a scheme has been defined, following the public inquiry process, and is submitted to the Department of Finance and Personnel for approval, prior to moving to the construction stage. That is in accordance with the process agreed with DFP.

As the Member is aware, I have reviewed spending priorities across my Department, and I am pleased that sufficient funding has been allocated to allow me to bring forward a balanced programme of improvements to our strategic road network that will make a significant difference to the people of Northern Ireland. I can assure the House that development work will continue on the A26 Glarryford to A44 Drones Road dualling, the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme and the A6 Londonderry to Dungiven scheme. However, delivery of those projects will be determined by the investment strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-2021, on which consultation recently concluded.

Mr G Robinson: I thank the Minister. As both projects will greatly enhance access to the north-west and north coast of Northern Ireland, does the Minister agree that both schemes will benefit our tourist industry and infrastructure and will encourage more inward investment in both areas?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question, and I acknowledge the benefits that both the A6 and a scheme such as the A26 would bring in economic terms for the movement of goods and services and for tourism, especially with so many events taking place later this year and next in the north-west. However, I must remind the Member that all those things are subject to available finance. As roads Minister, I want to promote the opportunities that we have to assist the construction industry, and the recent announcement of the expenditure of half a billion pounds on a balanced programme of road schemes across Northern Ireland has helped to do that. However, I also look to the investment strategy for future opportunities to bring forward projects such as those the Member raised.

2.45 pm

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister confirm that development work will be in place for the provision of a park-and-ride scheme in Dungiven before any announcement of the A6 Dungiven bypass?

Mr Kennedy: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I know that he has consistently lobbied for the Dungiven bypass in particular. I very much hope that, as part of any strategic improvement, issues such as park-and-ride facilities will be factored into the equation. We will continue to progress all the schemes along with the draft statutory orders being published and last December's environmental statement for the Londonderry to Dungiven section of road. We will move those on as far as we can. Again, however, available finance will be a key issue, and I cannot ignore that reality. I very much hope that all sections of the House, every party and all Members will bear that in mind as we move forward to consider the ISNI document and proposals.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister update the House on the progress of the public inquiry into the proposed A55 Knock Road upgrade?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his interest in that ongoing matter. Again, finance will be a big factor in the eventual outcome. Nevertheless, we are seeking to move forward all the statutory processes to be in a position to have that, along with other schemes, ready on the grid for progress.

Traffic Wardens

6. **Mr A Maginness** asked the Minister for Regional Development what training traffic wardens receive in relation to implementing the legislation they are enforcing. (AQO 1496/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Traffic attendants are employed by NSL Services Group, the private company currently contracted by Roads Service to provide parking enforcement and car park management services. Roads Service has advised that all traffic attendants undergo induction training that covers all aspects of their role and includes instruction on the legislation under which they operate. Initial training is followed up by on-site training with an experienced traffic attendant and a three-month probation period.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his reply. May I urge him to ask NSL to be sensitive and use discretion where necessary in its training of traffic wardens? At times, the law is strictly enforced but without any discretion to, for example, the elderly and those who may be disabled. I emphasise that to you. There is

the egregious example of a Blood Transfusion Service van that was parked outside —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Is there a question, please?

Mr A Maginness: — Larne town hall and received a parking ticket.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member and understand his point. However, the role of a traffic attendant is not without its challenges. They are not popular people, almost akin to Members of the House — *[Interruption.]* Well, so it seems. However, I assure the Member that the training provided to traffic attendants is to ensure that they carry out their duties in a fair and equitable manner in towns and places across Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that they achieve that in large part. Obviously, common sense plays a huge role in performing those important duties.

Lord Morrow: Following the withdrawal of traffic wardens from certain areas of Northern Ireland, including sections of west Belfast, after threats were received, will the Minister update the House on the current position? Will he also tell us what discussions he has had with the PSNI and the Minister of Justice on the issue?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. It is important that traffic attendants are allowed to perform their duties, wherever those duties take them. We are absolutely clear about that. I am happy to consult the Minister of Justice and, as issues are raised or events occur, to undertake any requirement to consult the PSNI. For traffic attendants, we simply cannot tolerate intimidation or any sense that there would be a no-go area. It is difficult but necessary work to ensure that traffic flows are maintained and illegal parking is controlled.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us the assessment criteria for the provision of traffic wardens in towns and villages?

Mr Kennedy: If the Member is looking for traffic wardens, that is genuinely a new one. The deployment of attendants depends on locations and traffic difficulties in a particular town or village. An assessment is made, areas are identified, and attendants are given duties in accordance with the agreed beats. Beats and their frequency are targeted at locations in which illegal parking is most prevalent and

causes most difficulties. While on patrol, traffic attendants are expected to issue penalty charge notices to vehicles that they detect as being illegally parked. If the Member is concerned about illegal parking in a particular town or village, I am happy to hear from him and to pass on the necessary information.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr David McClarty for a question.

Mr McClarty: Question 8.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Apologies. I am sorry to disappoint, but it is Mr Steven Agnew.

Mr Agnew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Question 7, which, I believe, comes before question 8 *[Laughter]*.

Cycling

7. **Mr Agnew** asked the Minister for Regional Development how much of the £500 million investment in sustainable modes of transport, as indicated in the draft Programme for Government, will be directed at promoting cycling and improving the cycling infrastructure. (AQO 1497/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: Mr Deputy Speaker, the Back Benches are in revolt. I was careful not to say that the Back Benches are revolting, in case I end up there — again.

I fully recognise the central role that transport plays in underpinning a successful regional economy, including the provision of public transport services. Our transport strategy proposes to move towards greater sustainability and to help to grow the economy. I recently provided the Member with details of how my Department proposes to allocate the £500 million over the Budget period. That includes projects to improve the railway network and the purchase of new trains and buses.

As for the promotion of cycling and the improvement of the cycling infrastructure, the investment includes over £3 million for active travel demonstration projects. It is intended that the projects will show how active travel can be successfully promoted and higher levels of walking and cycling achieved. The provision of a cycling infrastructure will be considered as part of any projects arising. Local councils have recently been invited to submit applications for that capital funding. Cycling has benefited

from several years of investment in the cycling infrastructure, as set out in the regional transport strategy, and the Belfast metropolitan transport plan is well established.

With regard to the provision of cycle paths until 2015, I can advise that the detailed budget has not yet been finalised, and it is, therefore, not possible to provide details of future work programmes at this time. However, it remains my Department's intention to continue to implement, so far as resources permit, the cycling infrastructure as set out in the BMTP and the RTS, which will complement the existing national cycle network.

Mr Agnew: Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for not being churlish despite my comments. I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that the prohibition of bikes on trains during morning rush hour is an impediment to more active transport and travel?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for raising that issue. It is an operational matter for Translink, but I will raise it with Translink once again and write to him with a detailed response.

Mr Beggs: In respect of improving the cycling infrastructure, will the Minister confirm that there is provision for cycleways in the A2 Greenisland scheme? That will link the east Antrim area to the greater Belfast network, and people will be able to cycle safely to Comber, Belfast and Lisburn.

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. He is a noted cyclist and has been a regular winner of the Stormont cycle race. His long-standing issue has been the upgrade of the A2. Three weeks ago, we were very pleased to make that positive announcement, and I am pleased today to indicate that cycle lanes and opportunities for cyclists on that new stretch of road will be available, and he can cycle merrily to wherever he wishes.

Mr Dickson: What progress has been made in respect of the public hire of bicycles, particularly in Belfast city centre and other towns across Northern Ireland?

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary question. I am sure that the Member's commitment to cycling is intense.

I am interested in reshaping the transport that people use, especially in central Belfast, so that

we can deal with some of the regular gridlock that occurs. An obvious way is to encourage cycling. That will mean that bicycles will become readily available at various points. I recently visited Dublin, which I am now allowed to do, and we looked at the arrangements there for cycling.

Mr A Maginness: It is a slippery slope.

Mr Kennedy: It is all-one way traffic. *[Laughter.]* They have a programme to encourage cycling and allow cyclists to hire bicycles at a very moderate cost and have the opportunity to cycle round the capital city of that jurisdiction.

Runkerry Development: Infrastructure

Mr Deputy Speaker: Mr David McClarty, your time has finally come.

Mr McClarty: Mr Deputy Speaker, while I voice concerns for your numeracy skills, I will ask question 8.

8. **Mr McClarty** asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline his plans on the infrastructure around the new Runkerry development on the Causeway Coast. (AQO 1498/11-15)

Mr Kennedy: My Department's Roads Service has no significant infrastructure plans relating to the proposed new development at Runkerry, which includes a golf course, hotel and 75 holiday homes. However, the applicant will construct a full, standard right-turn lane at the new access, together with a new footway link to Bushmills village.

A major Northern Ireland Water scheme was recently completed on the B146 Causeway Road. After the warranty period for those works expires in May 2013, Roads Service plans to resurface the Causeway Road from its junction with Whitepark Road to the Giant's Causeway site, subject to the availability of funding at that time.

Mr Deputy Speaker: There is just time to apply your literacy skills in a supplementary question.

Mr McClarty: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his response. There is concern that the proposed development will impact negatively on the natural surroundings. How will the Minister's Department ensure that the infrastructure work leading to the new development will blend into the environment while allowing sufficient access?

3.00 pm

Mr Kennedy: I am grateful to the Member for his supplementary. Obviously, in consideration as a major consultee to that planning application, now approved, which, I think, was welcomed by all sides of the House, Roads Service had a significant input. Undoubtedly, we will want to see the improvements brought forward sensitively and mindful of the environmental issues of that location. I have no doubt that my officials will carry that work forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That concludes a highly entertaining Question Time for the Minister for Regional Development.

Private Members' Business

Educational Assistance for Young People

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly notes the good work being done by further education colleges, as well as by schools; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to establish a working group, comprising officials from the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, the South Eastern Regional College and the PSNI to identify ways of improving access to further education for young people experiencing health, social and housing problems by addressing any barriers that exist in these areas. — [Mr Easton.]

Which amendment was:

Proposed: Leave out all after "working group," and insert:

"as part of a wider delivery mechanism to support the forthcoming Executive strategy for young people not in employment, education or training, comprising officials from the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, all further education colleges and the PSNI, to identify ways of improving access to further education for young people experiencing a range of personal and social barriers." — [Mr Lyttle.]

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Our party believes that the motion and the amendment are well meaning in their general intent; there is no doubt about that. However, as has been expressed by a number of contributors, we cannot for the life of us understand why the South Eastern Regional College alone is mentioned in the motion. Even party colleagues of the group of proposers have made that point. If there is one thing I cannot endure or stand, it is parochialism. *[Laughter.]* So I cannot stand that emphasis on one subregional college.

At least the Alliance Party amendment tried to tidy one aspect of the motion, and it made reference to all the FE colleges. However, there is still no reference to the Department of Education (DE), when it strikes me as being very obvious that there is a major role for the Department of Education in the matter. In the subgroup of Ministers that the proposers envisage joining Minister Farry, it appears that

they have eyes only for Nelson and Arlene and none for our John. The Department of Education definitely needs to be represented in any coming together. It is a glaring omission.

It is a particularly glaring omission, from the proposer's point of view, when you read a very sensible construction of a letter from Mervyn Storey MLA, Chairperson of the Education Committee, to Tom Elliott, Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), regarding the Programme for Government. It identifies gaps in the PFG. The letter says that numeracy and literacy, which we have just discussed, should be dealt with as a continuum from early years through to the adult learner. The Education Committee believes that the present split between the literacy and numeracy strategy, which has been developed in the Department of Education, and the essential skills strategy, which has been developed in the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), is unhelpful. That came from a letter from the DUP Chair of the Education Committee to the Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 18 January. That points up again why DE needs to be involved in any joined-up efforts here.

Of course, we welcome the debate. Any debate that places a focus on tackling disengagement from education is inherently a good thing. Our party brought a motion on that to the Chamber in the past few weeks. The inquiry into young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) by the Committee for Employment and Learning, chaired by my colleague Sue Ramsey, in the previous mandate, made a huge contribution to this debate and has resulted in a greater focus among MLAs, the Assembly and, indeed, the Executive.

As we know, young people not engaging with education, employment or training tend to fall into one or more of the following categories: teenage parents, homeless young people or young people who might be carers. In that regard, we should highlight such issues as timekeeping, attendance at school, completing homework or being bullied, which can arise for young people who are carers, young people with mental health difficulties or physical and learning disabilities, or young offenders.

Another area that I want to emphasise is rural broadband, and the inadequacy of broadband in many rural communities in particular. Poor

broadband provision meant that students in mid-Tyrone, Greencastle, Gortin and Broughderg, for example, could not sign up to a recent virtual learning week at their local FE college. That is another hurdle and barrier that needs to be highlighted.

Mr Wells: The Member, having condemned parochialism, takes us on an entangled tour of west Tyrone. I had never heard of Eskragh until he arrived in this Chamber. I have never been there but I certainly feel that I know it intimately as a result of his various speeches about it. However, he is simply incorrect about rural broadband. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment has signed a contract, on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), with Onwave, a company that now provides satellite broadband to every corner of Northern Ireland at a very reasonable cost. Therefore, there is absolutely no excuse whatsoever for any rural business to say now that it has not got high quality broadband. It is available and can be signed up to today.

Mr McElduff: I thank Mr Wells for his intervention. The broadband provision that you are talking about is obviously much more expensive, is not reliable and does not reach all quarters. For example, very often the antennae pick up only in areas where the satellite is in the sight line of a particular house. Every week, I deal with dozens of families in mid-Tyrone who face that problem.

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr McElduff: I will move on because I have only about half a minute left.

It is not possible for young people to make the most of their training and educational opportunities if those hurdles prevail.

The education maintenance allowance (EMA) must be retained and improved so that available resources are targeted at those in greatest need. There does, of course, need to be maximum collaboration between Ministers and across Departments —

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

Mr McElduff: — if we are to bring about real change and make sure that the children who are NEETs do not end up in that cycle of disadvantage.

Mr G Robinson: I welcome the debate, as it concentrates on the future of all our young people in Northern Ireland. I say that because young people are our future, and my contribution is based on that belief. I commend all the good work done by further education colleges and schools in the Province.

I am particularly pleased that the motion mentions a cross-departmental approach, which is essential in any proposals for improvement. Only with Departments working together can we ensure the very best outcome for our young people, especially in gaining qualifications at university or FE colleges.

I have said previously that I want to see skills matched with vacancies, but I also want every young person to have the opportunity to gain the skills that will maximise their employment chances. The motion aims for just that. Although the scheme outlined in the motion is a trial in the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, I am sure that the findings will apply throughout Northern Ireland.

There is high unemployment in my constituency. That is not an acceptable situation. Despite the attempts of the Enterprise Minister, inward investment is not easily forthcoming due to the harsh economic conditions that we are experiencing. That is why it is essential that every young person has the opportunity to maximise their practical skills set or academic qualifications. An interdepartmental approach gives every young person the best opportunity to do that.

I would also like to ensure that young people whose circumstances change, due perhaps to themselves or a parent losing a job, maintain their position in education. If a place is taken from a young person, surely we are only reinforcing poverty, isolation and unemployment.

I hope that all Members will support the motion and a bright future for our young people. I support the motion.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Although the motion, as many Members have said, concentrates on the South Eastern Education and Library Board area, the difficulties and concerns, or paranoia, experienced by some around the nature of the debate tells us that there are some concerns about how DEL might be broken up. People are trying to fight a battle that is not yet before us.

I understand that the debate is very much about young people who find themselves in difficult situations and who have been failed by society as a whole. People are talking about the nature of the debate and the type of partnerships and are looking for solutions when the problem has arisen, instead of looking at prevention rather than the cure, where there is need for greater support for families and much earlier intervention. Therefore, the onus is on the Executive to finally agree and publish a childcare strategy and to tell the Assembly, the people and the families in the North who is responsible for early years and nursery provision. The Executive failed to reach agreement on that in the previous mandate, and they have yet to reach agreement in this mandate.

In today's employment scene, at least one in four young people is unemployed and there is increased competition. Young people who left school with minimal qualifications and reduced life chances now face increased competition for every single job that is going. Many young graduates are now competing for the jobs that those young people would, historically, have been able to get. They are really at the bottom of the pile when it comes to employment chances. It is quite right for the motion to look for interdepartmental and cross-departmental co-operation and collaboration to meet the needs of those young people, albeit in a specific location.

Other Members talked about it being a pilot and how it might be something that others might aspire to and learn from. However, if people are being parochial, I can say that in my constituency of Upper Bann, the Southern Regional College has, since its inception, been a member of the five departments within the Department for Social Development's (DSD) neighbourhood renewal partnership boards in the southern regions, which are Armagh, Brownlow, Lurgan, Newry and Portadown. The total population is around 36,000, which amounts to 12% of the entire population of the area. Through engagement with DSD via those partnership boards, the college, in partnership with other statutory bodies, develops projects designed to meet local needs. The other partners include the Housing Executive, the local councils and the health and social care trusts. It would not be right to say that there are not existing partnerships and good practice out there already from which we can learn. Some of the initiatives that were funded and developed in those partnerships include Out of the Loop,

where 90 homes were given computers and free broadband for three years.

At this point, I have to support Mr McElduff. In Aghagallon and Aghalee in my area, broadband quality and access is poor and patchy and, sometimes, access to good broadband services depends on the weather conditions.

There are also projects that mentor —

Mr F McCann: I thank the Member for giving way. Going to the heart of the motion and the amendment, which refer to areas where there are severe difficulties, social exclusion, poor housing and poor health, if you were starting a pilot, would it not be better to pick one of the worst areas so that you could see the difficulties that exist and try to do something about them, rather than pick an area where, as you say, it has more to do with parochialism than trying to improve the situation?

The Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last week, the Community Relations Council published a report that tells us in very stark terms the challenges that face this Executive and Assembly. Children are living in poverty and in poor conditions, where poverty and deprivation levels are increasing, older people are suffering from poverty and sectarianism remains a challenge. The welfare reforms that are envisaged by the Westminster Government will hit young people particularly hard. They will have less opportunity for access to good housing and housing that is conducive to learning, given that even though they may wish to live alone, many of those young people may be forced into shared accommodation and, perhaps, will not have much control over who they will have to share that accommodation with.

3.15 pm

People who come here to look at whether they are going to invest and create jobs in the North talk about the skills, educational attainment and attitude of our workforce. Unfortunately, the Executive, who have placed the economy at the heart of the Programme for Government for the second time, are continuing to fail the workforce and not deliver. I accept that there is a worldwide recession, but —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — the number of people unemployed has increased almost threefold in the past five years.

Mrs Overend: The motion covers an extremely important aspect of our economy: the upskilling of our young people so that they can go out into the world with confidence and find a job, not only to improve their self-worth and gain job satisfaction but to enable them to better contribute to society. However, there is a need to recognise that there are various barriers and that many of our young people do not enter further education because of health, social or housing problems.

We have debated the issue of the EMA recently and how it should work to financially support our young people to remain in education. We have debated the issue of NEETs, many of whom could be facing barriers such as those previously mentioned. We have also debated youth unemployment and how one in five of our young people is without employment. That is a staggering figure. How many of those unemployed fail to secure a further level education?

Today, we are having yet another debate about our young people who are experiencing difficulties in accessing further education. That means one of two things: that we can talk all year about our teenagers and how we need to change and adapt structures in order to help them more or that it is time to take action on the issue. Perhaps it means both.

On 31 January 2012, I received confirmation from the Minister of Finance and Personnel that the Assembly received a whopping £26.5 million by way of a Barnett consequential as a result of the decision of the Department for Work and Pensions at Westminster to address youth unemployment under the Youth Contract. I urged the Minister then to bid for all of this money from the Executive to focus on Northern Ireland's high rate of youth unemployment, but we have not yet heard the details of those plans.

In trying to solve this ongoing problem, it would be useful to start at the beginning of a child's life and to make changes so that all our young people grow up to value education and see the positives that it can bring to individual lives. I would argue that the Department of Education is fundamental to tackling the issue seriously. As my colleague Basil McCrea, Chairman of the Committee for Employment and Learning, pointed out, we need a clear vision and strategy

to run from the start to the finish of a child's time in our education system.

I support the amendment in what it aspires to do. Cross-agency and cross-departmental action plans and strategies have been advocated in the Ulster Unionist Party manifesto, which states:

"It is essential therefore that there be put in place an overarching strategy for ensuring that no one is left behind at any level of the educational system. The Departments of Education, Employment and Learning and Social Development must work together in order to catch the likely underachievers before they fall too far."

Furthermore, we suggested that this strategy should be one of the priorities of the new Programme for Government and that newly appointed Ministers should jointly commit to it at the time of their nominations.

Perhaps the delay in laying down a plan to tackle this problem is down to the outstanding issue of the dissolution of the Department for Employment and Learning and what the future holds for those responsibilities — possibly the formation of a Department of the economy? Such a joined-up Department may make issues such as the one that we are debating today easier to address.

I congratulate further education colleges on the sterling job that they have done so far. They have been targeting and attracting students of all abilities. We must always champion the schools and colleges that have been delivering for those of all abilities and encourage those who could be doing so much more. I believe that finding a unique place for everyone in our society should be a key driver for our colleges and could be a good motto for our education system.

I welcome the aim of tackling a range of social and personal barriers that could prevent or affect educational achievement. According to a report by Save the Children, child poverty levels are increasing in Northern Ireland. That has a massive impact on educational achievement and the number of barriers to achievement.

As my party's spokesperson for the economy, I feel that it makes no sense whatsoever to leave many of our children to slip further behind their peers. It creates economic damage despite our record GCSE and A-level results compared with the rest of the UK. Companies looking to invest in Northern Ireland take note of our rivals and

the skilled workforces that they can offer. One simply has to look at the Scandinavian countries.

Only yesterday, we read in the 'Belfast Telegraph' that 40% of school leavers fail to achieve the target of five GCSEs, which is a minimum requirement for employers. We must seriously address the problem of underachievement and not simply pat ourselves on the back for the high achievers. I acknowledge that social and personal barriers are issues that need to be addressed, but we must look at the education system from start to finish and not simply pinpoint one area. Therefore, although I welcome and support the motion and amendment, I ask the Assembly —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Bring your remarks to a close.

Mrs Overend: — to deliver what it promises: proper joined-up government. I urge the Employment and Learning Minister to take a strong lead on the issue sooner rather than later.

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion. Members' contributions confirm that this is regarded as a very important issue for the Assembly and wider society. As I said in a recent and not unrelated Assembly debate, I regard youth unemployment as one of the major issues facing our society. I have also emphasised the importance of individual opportunity and the need to ensure that every person gets the support and encouragement that they deserve to fulfil their potential. That has to be our number one aim. Therefore, right at the outset, I will say that I fully support the broad thrust of the motion in acknowledging the good work being done with our young people by schools and further education colleges. I am aware of the many examples of the very difficult health-related, social and behavioural problems that colleges help young people to deal with daily.

The transition from school to education, training or employment can be very stressful for young people at the best of times, but it is even more so for those who also face particular difficulties in their lives. The Careers Service has a pivotal role to play in that transition. All year 12 school pupils are offered an individual careers guidance interview to help them to decide on their career pathways. To support the inclusion of all hard-to-reach groups, the service works with a number of stakeholders who advocate on behalf of those

young people to help them to access education, training or employment.

The motion calls on me to establish a working group to identify ways of improving access to further education for young people who face a number of barriers to participation. That is a very specific request — in fact, it may be too specific. There are risks in isolating that dimension from the wider range of issues to be addressed, and I will come to those shortly. Our extensive work over the past year or so on the wider issue of those not in education, employment or training — the so-called NEETs group — has shone the spotlight on the different and often multifaceted problems affecting some young people. Effective engagement with those young people will be a significant part of the solution.

Further education colleges offer a wide variety of opportunities to 16- to 18-year-olds. Around 31% of all DEL-funded FE enrolments are for people in that age group. The bulk of those enrolments are on regulated vocational courses, from entry level up to level 3, that are delivered on a full-time or part-time basis. In addition, colleges are significant providers of the Department's Training for Success programme. In fact, some 48% of the 9,000 or so under 19-year-olds on the different strands of that programme are college based. That means that over half of Training for Success is delivered by training suppliers. They also play a crucial role in engaging young people and helping them to overcome their barriers to participating in training.

Training for Success provides the Department's guarantee of training for all 16- and 17-year-olds who are not in education or employment. Skills for Your Life addresses the personal and development needs of young people who have disengaged from learning and/or have significant barriers to participation. The Skills for Work strand helps young people to gain skills and vocational qualifications at level 1 and to progress to higher-level training, including programme-led apprenticeships, or to further education or employment.

Young people coming into Training for Success, in particular the Skills for Your Life strand, can be given additional special support to overcome their problems and to develop. Training suppliers, including colleges, can work in conjunction with specialist support providers, such as Disability Action, Sensory Learning Support

and Opportunity Youth, to name but a few. Of course, the age criteria for Training for Success have been extended to 22 for young people with a disability and to 24 for those leaving care. In addition, further education colleges are the major deliverers of essential skills courses in many areas of literacy, numeracy and ICT. Many young people face particular barriers in those areas and, where needed, essential skills courses are a mandatory element of further education provision for all 16- to 18-year-olds and of training provision.

Given the wide range of opportunities that they offer and their presence throughout the 45 main campuses and in communities across Northern Ireland, colleges play a vital role in encouraging young people, including those most at risk, to engage with education and training. Colleges have built strong partnerships with schools, communities and employers in their areas. However, importantly, colleges have also established very effective partnerships with health and social care trusts, other agencies and a wide range of voluntary and community organisations. For example, in partnership with the Prince's Trust, colleges deliver programmes that engage directly with difficult-to-reach young learners. In particular, they deliver the Team programme, which is a 12-week course for 16- to 24-year-olds that promotes personal development and engages young people in a range of confidence-boosting activities, including work placements. Participation in such programmes engenders positive attitudes that can encourage progression into further education, training or employment.

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

The work that colleges do in partnership with schools to deliver the vocational element of the entitlement framework is also extremely beneficial. The practical courses on offer do much to engage young people in vocational education and training. This positive introduction to what colleges have to offer can be a strong encouragement to young people, including those at risk of dropping out, to take up further education or training when they leave school. Colleges also play a key role in widening access for young people to higher education provision in Northern Ireland. Although we outperform the rest of the UK in that area, my Department's new widening participation strategy will see an enhanced role for the FE sector.

Of course, financial support is always a key issue. Members will be aware that my Department and the Department of Education are conducting a review of the education maintenance allowance. The outcome of that review will be important, particularly the desire to direct EMA support to those who need it most. It is interesting to note that around 40% of EMA recipients attend an FE college. However, colleges have other forms of financial support for students. First, all 16- to 18-year-olds, with the exception of international students, have access to free further education and do not pay fees. Secondly, the Care to Learn scheme provides childcare support for students who are young parents, and, thirdly, students under 19 who are living more than three miles from their local college can receive free transport. In addition, there is further support available on a means-tested basis; for example, free meals and assistance towards the cost of clothing in relation to their course of study. There is also a hardship fund for students aged over 19 to provide assistance with fees, books, equipment and living costs. My Department also provides funding to colleges in order to support specialist provision for students with a learning disability or a physical disability.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for outlining a number of the different programmes in place. Given that the pilot project for the learner access and engagement programme was very successful in showing dividends, particularly for young people who had no qualifications, will the Minister now commit to mainstreaming that in the budget for the year ahead?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her intervention. We are looking at that. I concur with the broad thrust of what she said. However, a separate decision has to be taken.

3.30 pm

Although it is important to find ways to improve access to education and training, it is equally important that young people are encouraged, motivated and supported to remain in college and to achieve the qualifications that they have set out to achieve. Crucial to that is ensuring that young people follow programmes of study that stimulate their interests and meet their career aspirations. That is why, as part of the induction process, every young person who starts at college agrees an individual learning plan that leads to relevant qualifications. That

is then followed up with regular interviews with course tutors.

Unfortunately, colleges frequently have to address issues that can get in the way of a young person's ability to learn. Those issues range from financial constraints to a variety of social, health and behavioural problems. Colleges have been very successful in working with a range of agencies to address issues, such as drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness and mental health issues. They have also established effective partnerships with health and social care trusts to support young people in care or leaving care to be able to access courses that suit their needs.

Colleges have also given priority to staff development. Staff are given specialist training to work with young people who experience problems. Colleges also have ongoing contact with the Samaritans, the Housing Executive and Citizens Advice to assist learners who experience mental health problems, homelessness or debt issues. For example, staff in the South Eastern Regional College hold regular case conferences to identify young people who are most at risk and to agree a package of support to help them to continue and to achieve their qualifications. Other examples are the Belfast Metropolitan College and the North West Regional College, which have been awarded the Buttle UK charter mark for innovative and proactive work in helping young people from a care background to gain access to further and higher education.

In outlining the excellent work that colleges do, often in trying circumstances, I would not want to be in any way complacent. Clearly, considerable issues remain for a number of young people. That is why my Department has taken the lead in developing a cross-departmental NEET strategy. I want to stress that it is cross-departmental; it is an example of joined-up government. Many Members will have participated in the debate on NEETs on 6 February and will appreciate the strong link between the discussion then and the debate today. Following extensive consultation and the Committee for Employment and Learning's inquiry, I will bring a final draft strategy on NEETs to the Executive in April. After that, I will make a full statement to the Assembly. My Department is finalising its contribution to ensure that we are doing all that we can to support young people to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the Department so

that they can fulfil their potential. We are guided a great deal by the consideration and advice of the Committee and its members in that regard.

I have also put to the Executive a paper on youth unemployment, which remains under active consideration. That will also include actions that are aimed specifically at young people in the NEETs category. Obviously, that discussion has to be held in the Executive. Again, I commit to coming back to the Assembly to report on the way forward for policy when it is approved by the Executive. Of course, that will require additional resources. I suspect that that applies not only to my Department but to others. If the Assembly is serious about tackling youth unemployment and exclusion — and I believe that it is — rhetoric has to be matched by resources.

Returning to the specific question that was posed by the debate, namely the establishment of a working group to identify ways to improve access to further education for young people who face a number of problems, I want to raise a number of points. First, my NEETs paper to the Executive will include proposals on how to drive the implementation of the NEETs strategy at the highest level. For example, that might be through the current ministerial subcommittee for children and young people, which would give ministerial leadership to that most important of issues. A NEETs subgroup that is comprised of representatives from relevant Departments and stakeholder groups, informed by experts in the NEETs area and reporting directly to the ministerial subcommittee, would give added momentum and strategic direction. It would encompass the full range of Departments and policy responsibilities that are covered in the motion and beyond.

I want to make it clear that the Department of Education has been a key partner in the development of the NEETs strategy to date. At present, it actively contributes to the development of the interdepartmental strategy. It will continue to be a critical player in this and all other interdepartmental working on the needs of children and young people. The participation of the Department of Education should be clearly understood as implicitly covered by the amendment to the motion. Although I welcome the motion's suggestion of establishing a working group, I think that it would be premature to establish a separate group that, effectively,

would deal with an area that is an integral part of existing and planned structures.

In conclusion, I have listened with interest to Members' views on what is an extremely important issue for us all. I particularly welcome the acknowledgement that the problems encountered by many young people, as they make the transition from school, cannot be solved by one Department alone. It is incumbent on us all, working with our service deliverers and stakeholders, to align all our services in the best possible way to support every young person on the journey from school or college to the world of work.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the debate and thank the Member who proposed the motion for accepting the Alliance Party's amendment.

I think that all Members will agree on the need to remove any barriers that prevent young people from accessing further education. The problem of those young people who are in not in education, employment or training — the so-called NEETs group — requires multiagency and cross-departmental co-operation. That has been clear and evident from the debate. It is not just an employment and learning issue, and the Department for Employment and Learning will have to work closely with the Department of Education. There must be no gaps in responsibility for our young people and their ability to gain the appropriate qualifications and move into the world of work. Indeed, there must be that necessary cross-cutting relationship between Departments to resolve the problem.

The NEETs group must be targeted, and I know that the Minister will launch a strategy to do that. It is estimated that every young person who is not in education, training or employment costs the economy some £160,000. If we can get them into further education, they will, even in these difficult and constrained economic times, have an easier time in getting employment. This issue must be prioritised, and I am glad that the Minister has made it such a priority. If we wait until young people have left school before addressing the barriers that they may face, we will not deal with the problem effectively. Indeed, every contributor to the debate has commented on that. It is a problem that must be addressed from early years through to further education level, and we all need to become involved in it. We need to ensure that there is early years intervention

and prevention, and by investing as early as possible, we can reduce the amount of money that will have to be spent at the stage that the motion is attempting to address.

Accessing further education is vital if we are to improve the skills sets of our young people. If we are to grow the economy, ensuring that our workforce has the correct skills is paramount, and the skills strategy that the Minister referred to in his statement earlier today is vital. This is a cross-cutting issue that needs the co-operation of all Departments. I recognise that the motion should, perhaps, have included references to the Department of Education and the Executive but I believe that that is contained in the spirit of the motion.

I want to turn briefly to those Members who contributed to the debate. I, again, thank Mr Easton for accepting the amendment to the motion. In his contribution, he gave particular emphasis to early years provision and the need to address issues with numeracy and literacy. He also said that we need to equip young people with numeracy and literacy skills before they arrive at further education colleges, and other Members referred to the excellent work that all our further education colleges are doing to deal with some of the most basic educational requirements of our young people.

Mr Lyttle told us that some 45,000 young people are not in education or training and that we need a multiagency approach to tackle the problem.

Mr McCann had concerns about the exclusion of the Department of Education from the debate, but I assure him that it is as much a part of the debate and is as necessary to resolving the problem as all the other Departments listed in the motion.

I turn to Mr Ramsey's comments. He said that the spirit of the motion included the Department of Education, but he recognised the need for DEL to lead on the matters in hand, particularly on the NEETs group of young people, and the frustration at the delivery of a NEETs strategy for Northern Ireland. I share that frustration. We need action, Minister, on those matters.

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

Mr Craig: The motion tabled by my colleague Mr Easton seeks to address the problem of educational assistance for those who are experiencing a vast array of social, health and economic barriers in Northern Ireland. Looking

at the motion, I should commend the work of schools and further education colleges, because education has been made more widely available to those from lower-income families. The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education have sought to raise standards of achievement of young people in essential academic and vocational subjects.

At present, however, there are many issues surrounding access to further education. Although many steps have been taken by individual Departments, a joined-up approach in the form of a working group would further expand expertise and tackle the problem directly. There are many consequences for young people as a result of not being in education, employment or training, and the Assembly should want to eradicate the notion that those young people will become disengaged and uninterested by dealing with the matter collectively.

When the problem of access to further education is raised, it is often recognised that many young people who do not receive encouragement to progress through education suffer from low self-esteem and have few or no aspirations. That can often lead to involvement in criminal activity, which is why the motion also calls for the involvement of the PSNI.

Social background is a factor that many judge indicative of whether a young person is likely to succeed in further education and training. The allocation of £2.5 million by DEL to implement various initiatives to encourage participation has stimulated a demand for further education among disadvantaged and unrepresented social groups. Through the involvement of other Departments, such as the Department for Social Development and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, incentives can be identified that will further assist those who experience health or social difficulties to meet their full educational potential.

The Department of Education and DHSSPS are already working to improve GCSE and A-level attainment. DSD has also been involved in those developments. Schools and colleges are broadening their scope, and that is noticeable in the rate of take-up of higher education — Northern Ireland has one of the highest in the UK. However, greater cohesion and a joined-up approach are needed in order to address the issues of those young people who suffer from emotional and mental health problems, who have spent most of their childhood in social care, who need encouragement and support to

attain their potential or who require financial support through the education maintenance allowance and other initiatives.

3.45 pm

I listened with great interest to comments made from the Benches opposite. Although I do not disagree that the Department of Education might well have been included, the spirit and implication of the motion are that all Departments, including the Department of Education, need to get their head around the issue. As a House, we need to understand —

Mr F McCann: Raymond McCartney and Barry McElduff raised that issue. If you are saying that the Department of Education will play a full role, why not include it from the start? It has the resources and looks after a big section of the people who are being discussed.

Mr Craig: I have tried very hard to make it clear that I have no great difficulty with what the Member has said. The difficulty is that we cannot rewrite motions while they are being debated. If the Member felt so strongly, why did he not table an amendment, which would have been accepted? That said —

Ms S Ramsey: You are getting him into trouble now.

Mr Craig: Yes. I hope that the Member will accept the spirit of the motion.

There are some very serious issues, and I will give the House an example of what it means in reality. I make no apologies for my parochialism regarding the South Eastern Regional College, of which we in Lisburn are very proud. We live in a society that thinks that it has dealt with underlying poverty issues. There is an idea that there is no homelessness and no need for anyone to be on the streets, starving or begging. The local college gave me an example of an individual who, unfortunately, tried to take their own life. When the college investigated the young person's background, it was discovered that having been thrown out of home, the individual was living in a cardboard box. The person was 17 years of age. Here we are in Northern Ireland, and someone is living in a cardboard box and is socially excluded. We have a lot of work to do to meet the needs of such individuals, and I pay tribute to our local college, which, along with the Health Department, put in a lot of work and effort to sort out that individual's issues.

How will such people climb out of the poverty trap in our country? The only way is through

education, and that is why it is essential that we get the strategy right. We must bring all Departments together, create a cohesive strategy to engage with those young people, bring them out of poverty through education and, through that, move Northern Ireland forward. We cannot all work in the shipyard. All the manual labour jobs are gone, and a lot of the skills required in the past are no longer required. They have all been replaced by skills sets that need higher education. Therefore, we need to provide more education for socially excluded children.

I listened with great interest to Barry McElduff, and, when I started talking about parochialism, I thought about the pot calling the kettle black. In true fashion, Barry went through a list of his local villages that have issues with rural broadband. We do not have to go up to Tyrone to find issues with local broadband. I remind the Minister, who is sitting here, that there are also issues in Annahilt, and I live only 10 miles outside Belfast. Broadband is an issue but it is not the main issue.

I thank the Minister for saying that his cross-departmental NEETs strategy, which is in draft form, will go to the Executive in April. That will be a huge step forward. I will not second-guess what will come out of that review and what will eventually be brought to this House, but the idea that we are moving the whole NEETs area forward is welcome, and I, for one, welcome the fact that the Minister is doing that. I also welcome the amendment that was brought by his party colleagues, and I hope that the entire House will support the motion and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes the good work being done by further education colleges, as well as by schools; and calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to establish a working group as part of a wider delivery mechanism to support the forthcoming Executive strategy for young people not in employment, education or training, comprising officials from the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, all further education colleges and the PSNI, to identify ways of improving access to further education for young people experiencing a range of personal and social barriers.

Fairtrade Fortnight

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next item of business is a cross-party motion on Fairtrade Fortnight. The Minister of Finance and Personnel has notified the Speaker that he is unable to attend the debate today. The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment will respond to the debate on his behalf. 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 a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McDevitt: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges Fairtrade Fortnight; notes the adoption of Fairtrade procurement policies by many branches of local and central government; and calls on the Executive to review Fairtrade procurement policy with a view to supporting Fairtrade when and where possible.

At the outset, on behalf of the all-party group on international development, which is chaired by me and vice-chaired by Mr Jim Wells, I thank Mr Dickson, Ms McCann and Mr Swann for having added their names to the motion, thus making it a motion that enjoys the support of all the major parties in the House.

Fairtrade Fortnight is with us again, and it is a moment in the year during the period of Lent when we get to reflect on the opportunity that we all have as individuals, as consumers, as corporate consumers — public bodies that buy and procure services and goods — and as businesses that procure services and goods to play a constructive role, as global citizens, in the development of the lives of primary producers in parts of the world that are less developed than our own.

Fair trade is, indeed, about better prices, but it is also about decent working conditions, eliminating child labour, environmental sustainability and the serious business of producing commodities at the same time as respecting the world, heritage and environment in which they are being produced. It is about a better deal and fairer terms for farmers and workers in the developing world, and it enables some of the most disadvantaged farmers who are producing at the smallest conceivable scale of production to be able to successfully trade in global markets and, by doing so, alleviate their own poverty and create sustainability and cohesion in their

communities so that we can reduce the grotesque, obscene inequalities that are still pervasive in our world today.

Last night in the Long Gallery, junior Minister Bell and junior Minister Anderson added their formal approval and support to Northern Ireland's efforts to continue to promote and live by the highest possible standards of ethical purchasing and principles of fair trade, and everyone in the all-party group acknowledges the contribution that the junior Ministers made to this debate last night. We look forward to them continuing to champion the Fairtrade and international development trade cause around the Executive table.

To put things in context, eight million people in 63 countries in the developing world benefit directly from fair trade in the developed world; they are the primary producers and their families. Eight million lives — more than the entire population of this island — benefit directly. In truth, probably 100 million families benefit indirectly from our decision on this side of the world to place fair trade strategically on the agenda. Sales exceeded £1.7 billion in the UK last year, and €14 million in the South. It is big money, yet, when you break it down by household, we spend only about £1 per household per week on fair trade goods. If we think about it at the household level, there is so much opportunity for us to be even more ethical in our consumption.

I will address one issue that is often raised around fair trade: displacement. Are we not promoting the local sourcing of food? Do we not want to buy local? Of course we do, and good fair trade should never displace; it should complement. Good fair trade is about buying the stuff that must come from beyond these shores in a more ethical and fair way. It is not just about coffee and chocolate or cocoa; it is not just about bananas or other foodstuffs: it is about the cotton that we put in the bed linen in hospitals and that we use to clothe our surgeons and medical teams when they go to work in them. It can also be about sustainable materials, quarried products and consumables in the building industry. Those are all commodities that can be considered, traded and sourced ethically in a fair trade framework.

The great challenge for government in the years ahead is to begin to think about fair trade at that level. We have some excellent examples

of fair trade champions in this region; quite a few of our local councils have full Fairtrade accreditation. Queen's University does, too, and the University of Ulster started the process of formal accreditation just this month. However, the Assembly has not, and neither have the Northern Ireland Executive as a whole. There is an immediate first opportunity, at a regional level, to demonstrate a commitment to fair trade by entering into the formal accreditation process that commits us to ensuring that we incorporate the principles of fair trade into our procurement policies.

There is a plethora of legislation and public policy frameworks that tell us how we can be more ethical in our procurement. Some of it, such as the 2003 public sector food procurement initiative that the Government in London introduced, is very helpful. Some of it, such as some EU directives, is less so.

The Civil Service in Northern Ireland is a fantastic thing; its members can be the best of people and the worst of people, all in one afternoon. When civil servants are expansive they will find us a way of doing something. However, when we feel that they are being a little less imaginative, out will pop something like the EU directive that governs procurement at a European Union level — the Official Journal procurement regulations. We will be pointed to the barriers that exist, and there are some. However, regions in other countries have found ways around those barriers.

Indeed, Peter Mandelson, a man whom we love to hate in this part of Ireland — that is probably an understatement — deserved some credit when he was European Commissioner for External Trade for having pioneered a lot of work in promoting ways in which public authorities across Europe can integrate fair trade criteria into public tenders and purchasing policies, and requiring the Commission to produce deeper and more robust guidelines around that issue.

That type of leadership has allowed a number of regions that are very close to us, most notably Wales and Scotland, to begin a process of actively promoting Fairtrade policy in procurement. An initiative called Help Make Wales a Fair Trade Country was a great success. It increased awareness from 44% to over 60% among the Welsh population over about three months and led to a significant uptake in the consumption of Fairtrade products. The Welsh Assembly has also grant-aided a full-time fair trade development

position — a champion — in government to allow the opportunity for fair trade to be further explored.

It is fair to say that we would like today's debate to be the beginning of a process of doing two things: the incorporation of the Northern Ireland Executive and all the Departments as an accredited Fairtrade entity and a firm commitment from the Executive to be imaginative about using procurement policy to the best advantage to maximise the opportunity for Fairtrade and ethically sourced products to be incorporated not just into the consumables that government will buy but into other areas of government expenditure, like cotton, which are less obvious today when we think or talk about fair trade.

I am grateful to colleagues on the all-party group on international development for their support for the motion.

4.00 pm

Mr Hamilton: I thank the Member who spoke previously and his colleagues on the all-party group on international development who tabled the motion. I put on record my praise for the work of that all-party group. This Building is awash with all-party groups — so many, in fact, that we need an all-party group to look after all the all-party groups. I am sure that they are very earnest in their work, but most certainly would not have the profile to bring the very useful and opportune business to the Chamber that the all-party group on international development has. Since that group's inception, which was not even in the previous term but during the experimental devolution in the early part of the century, it has been at the forefront of bringing forward issues that are of mutual and shared concern across all the major parties in the Assembly. I commend the members of the group for the work that they have done and the work that they do today. I encourage them to do likewise in the future.

I welcome the opportunity to have the debate. Sometimes, in this place, we are a little too insular for my liking. It is a bit of a by-product of the Troubles. Understandably, we looked in on ourselves and did not really care a terrible lot about the world around us. As a wealthier nation, however, we have a responsibility to look at the world around us and play a constructive role. Sometimes, it may not feel like it, but we are a wealthier nation, and we have a duty and responsibility to do much more for the world around us. This is a welcome opportunity to

remind ourselves that billions of people around the world live in abject poverty day in, day out. Bad as it sometimes feels here and despite the many difficulties that we have had to come through and continue to contend with, we need to remind ourselves every so often that, in this country, we are exceptionally blessed and that many people around the world look at us and what we have with envy. We have a responsibility. The all-party group has highlighted in the past the fact that there is a real sense of willingness — there are exceptionally generous people in this part of the world — to help charities that work in developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia.

This is a good opportunity to raise the profile of the issue and educate people that there is an option for them. You give people a choice and you educate them about that choice. I like Fairtrade for precisely the reasons that Mr McDevitt outlined: it is about trade, not about handouts. Goodness only knows that, for many years, we looked at developing countries as places to just give things to and not to assist. We could help them to get out of the problems that they were in at that time, but we did not want them to develop in the way in which the rest of the world had developed. Fairtrade is a small way by which we can encourage them to develop their economies and to raise the standards that Mr McDevitt talked about. It is far from a charity, which we should avoid when dealing with such commodities.

As Mr McDevitt pointed out, as well as decent working conditions, Fairtrade deals with sustainability. Consumers are increasingly aware of that. There is a public consciousness about such things. Although times are difficult, people are starting to ask more questions about the working conditions of those producing these commodities and the sustainability of the products. That is something that public consciousness is catching on to.

The thrust of the motion is about procurement, particularly public procurement in Northern Ireland at Executive and departmental levels. One thing that I have learnt through the years, in whatever role that I have had, is that getting the flexibility that at times we would all like to see in procurement is not as easy as we would perhaps like. In many respects, we are severely limited. Mr McDevitt cited other countries, and there are always other countries that seem to do things much more flexibly than us. He

cited Scotland, but a Scottish political party's manifesto that I looked at recently said that it wanted to look at and learn lessons from Northern Ireland's procurement policy. There are limitations, although it must be pointed out that guidance on fair trading, including Fairtrade options in procurement contracts, has been offered to Departments since as far back as 2006. That has produced contracts containing Fairtrade options being awarded recently. We are moving in the right direction. I appreciate that there is progress to be made, but an opportunity for that may be presented in a new EU procurement directive, which shows signs of allowing a little more —

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

Mr Hamilton: — flexibility. Therefore, there may be opportunities to do things much more positively than perhaps we have done so far, and that is what we would like. I again commend the motion to the House and praise those who tabled it.

Mr Swann: On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I fully support the motion tabled by the all-party group on international development. I acknowledge the Fairtrade movement's excellent achievements, such as Fairtrade Fortnight. I call on the Executive, as stated in the motion:

“to review Fairtrade procurement policy with a view to supporting Fairtrade when and where possible.”

As a society, we must pay due regard to the origins of the everyday items that we take for granted. In a globalised world, it is essential that developed countries such as Northern Ireland help producers in developing countries achieve a fair and decent standard of living. That is why I commend the Fairtrade movement and the work that it has undertaken in the past four decades to ensure that producers in developing countries get a fair deal.

Fairtrade is a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency and respect. As Mr Hamilton said, it is not the charity that some people think it is. It seeks greater equality in international trading. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions and through securing the rights of marginalised producers and workers. Here, the ethos of Fairtrade is backed by major organisations, such as Oxfam and the British Association for Fair Trade Shops. Sales of

certified Fairtrade products have continued to rise year after year, so great is respect for the movement. In 1998, certified Fairtrade coffee had total sales of £13.7 million. In 2011, that had risen to £194.3 million. Certified Fairtrade tea had sales of £86.7 million in 2011, and that is up from sales of £2 million in 1998. Those figures are testament to the hard work of supporters of Fairtrade, who daily help millions of producers in developing countries out of poverty and onto the road to sustainable and fair living conditions.

Fairtrade continues to grow on the world stage and particularly in Europe. Ulster Unionists are delighted to support Fairtrade in the Assembly and Europe. In the European Parliament, my party colleague Jim Nicholson MEP was pleased to support a unanimously adopted resolution on fair trade, which recognised the benefits achieved by the Fairtrade movement. That resolution is somewhat similar to the motion that we are debating.

I am proud to add that Northern Ireland has played its part in the fair trade movement. The UK Fairtrade Foundation awarded our capital city of Belfast Fairtrade City status in June 2005. To qualify for that title, a city or town must undertake initiatives that include the local council passing a resolution in support of fair trade and agreeing to serve Fairtrade coffee and tea at its meetings and in its offices, canteens and catering establishments. It was also highlighted that Dundonald and Antrim have Fairtrade Town status, and I hope that, in the future, Northern Ireland can increase the number of its towns with that recognition by working hard to ensure that fair trade is practised and promoted.

Mr Wells: I thank the Member for giving way. We are back to the old adage that the world ends at Glengormley. Outside the greater Belfast area, the Member should note that Warrenpoint, which is somewhere down south in Northern Ireland, is also a Fairtrade Town.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Ford: I thank the Member for giving way. As we are in correction mood, the Member should note that Antrim is a Fairtrade Borough, which encompasses the entire borough and not merely the town.

Mr Swann: I will not need the extra minute, because those interventions allow me to take out most of the next paragraph, in which I go on to expand on other areas of Northern Ireland that have Fairtrade status.

Anyway, another major achievement for fair trade in Northern Ireland was accomplished when Queen's University Belfast was awarded Fairtrade status in 2006. As the university is also a Belfast City Council flagship employer, it played a key role in the council's successful bid for Belfast to be declared a UK Fairtrade City. I welcome the moves, as highlighted earlier, by the University of Ulster to start down that road. As a result, Queen's University has a fair trade policy, a fair trade steering group and Fairtrade goods are available in all the university's food and beverage outlets. That could be reproduced in the Assembly.

I also want to use the debate to highlight the fact that, while there are many significant differences between producers in Third World countries and farmers in Northern Ireland, the Fairtrade Foundation has stated that many farmers in the UK face issues similar to those of farmers elsewhere, not least in struggling to ensure that they get a decent return for upholding social and environmental standards in their production. As Mr McDevitt said, our farmers should be there to complement as well as to produce and support. I accept that a fair trade system that operates for developing countries may not be as appropriate for our farmers, but we could look into the causes of the problems experienced by domestic producers, so that more robust and wide-reaching policy tools can be identified.

Considering its many significant achievements, I wish to once again commend the work of Fairtrade Fortnight and urge the Executive to use the opportunity to review fair trade procurement policy with a view to supporting Fairtrade when and where possible in order to help producers and suppliers get a fair deal for what they sell.

Mr McCarthy: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I very much welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue, particularly as we are in the middle of the Fairtrade Fortnight. Indeed, much of what I wanted to say has already been said, so I will not detain you any longer than is necessary.

A Member: So is that it?

Mr McCarthy: Well, almost.

Events are taking place in this period to highlight the issue. I know that many organisations use a promotional week each year to gain publicity for their good cause. However, I encourage all people to buy Fairtrade products throughout the year, not just during this fortnight. I am very encouraged by the Assembly's catering staff, who put on offers and displays during this Fairtrade Fortnight. I know that they put Fairtrade products on sale all year round, so I say, "Very well done" to them. May they continue to do that.

We are seeing more and more businesses putting Fairtrade goods right at the heart of their businesses. That is because the public are becoming more responsible in buying goods. They want to know where the products come from and they wish the producers to receive a fair price for goods. By buying Fairtrade goods, we all help to pay farmers and producers in developing countries a sustainable price. That will enable them to look after their families and buy themselves out of poverty. We have a responsibility to help play our part in doing that.

As I understand it, the natural laws of the international free market dictate that farmers and producers have to sell at the lowest price. That is often grossly unfair and results in some people earning less than \$1 a day for their family. We need to put sustainable development and social equity into the market and correct that problem.

A number of my colleagues have been advocates of fair trade in their local council. Judith Cochrane, when she was a Castlereagh councillor, proposed a motion for the Dundonald area to move towards Fairtrade status. Councillor Anne Wilson and our leader David Ford, when he was a councillor, lobbied for North Down and Antrim councils respectively to improve their Fairtrade status. I did so myself as a member of Ards Borough Council. I know that many politicians from all parties have done similar good work, and I pay tribute to them for all their efforts in such a valuable cause. I pay particular tribute to Mrs Carol Press, a very special lady living in Black Abbey, which is outside Greyabbey on the Ards peninsula, for her dedication to the cause of fair trade over the years. She was probably one of the first to mention Fairtrade. So, I pay tribute to Carol for all her work. I think she was in the Building last night to support the Fairtrade effort.

We need leadership from the Executive to encourage everyone, businesses and consumers, to buy Fairtrade, and I have no doubt that that will come. They cannot do just the bare minimum, the statutory requirement. We need them to do all that is possible to promote and purchase Fairtrade. I am grateful that both the junior Ministers were, I understand, in the Long Gallery with the Fairtrade people last night. If we all put extra effort into supporting Fairtrade, we will have played our part in making life much better for our brothers and sisters in the developing world. I fully support this cross-party motion.

4.15 pm

Mr Copeland: I, too, support the motion, and I want to highlight the excellent work undertaken by the Fairtrade movement in highlighting fair and ethical trading during Fairtrade Fortnight. The movement originated in Europe about 40 years ago and perhaps stands in stark contrast in many ways to what we were going through here 40 years ago. However, here we are, in the middle of Fairtrade Fortnight.

The issue began in the global south — Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean — and attempted to build direct, sustainable relationships with disadvantaged producers, providing fair access to markets in what they viewed as the developed north. With those aims, Fairtrade has developed and grown into a significant international movement — some would say business — symbolised by a high level of European co-operation, as my colleague Mr Swann mentioned. The issue of fair trade across Europe has become a major item on the political agenda of many countries, as ethical trading and sustainability of supply become even more important, particularly in countries that could be described as post-empire.

I am proud that we in the United Kingdom play our part as a world leader in the purchase of Fairtrade products. More than 4,500 products are licensed in the United Kingdom to carry the Fairtrade mark, and in 2011 purchases of Fairtrade products totalled £1.3 billion. That is a dramatic rise from the estimated £16.7 million of Fairtrade products purchased in 1998. That demonstrates the desire of the British public to buy ethically and to ensure that those producing the goods get the fair deal that they are entitled to. Purchasing Fairtrade products means that more than 1.5 million people — pretty close to the population of Northern Ireland — farmers

and workers across 60 developing countries, benefit from the international Fairtrade system.

In a local context, it is often the case that consumers will look for the most competitively priced product on shop shelves without regard to how it was made, where it came from or whether the producer was getting a fair deal. That has become even more true in these stringent economic times, when household budgets are squeezed and there is less money to spend at the tills. Despite that, I am pleased to hear today of Northern Ireland's continued support for the Fairtrade movement. With Belfast and other areas having achieved Fairtrade City status, it would be an excellent show of Northern Ireland's commitment to fair trade if the Executive were to follow in the steps of Belfast and other parts of the country and utilise their procurement procedures to focus at least in part on the purchase, where possible, of Fairtrade products. That would demonstrate the Executive's commitment to positively supporting the ethical sourcing and purchase of goods, products and services. The Ulster Unionist Party notes the Executive's commitment to bringing forward a strategy to promote fair and ethical trading that will sit within the framework for their sustainable development strategy. I urge them to bring that forward at the earliest possible opportunity.

We heard today of the untold benefits that Fairtrade has brought to the poorest producers around the world. As such, the Ulster Unionist Party fully supports the motion, acknowledging the fantastic work undertaken during Fairtrade Fortnight, and asks the Executive, respectfully, to review their procurement practices to support the purchase of Fairtrade products when and where possible.

Mr Eastwood: I congratulate the all-party group on international development and its work on bringing the Fairtrade issue to the attention of the public. That is the bottom line. Fairtrade has come a long way from its humble beginnings. People now make a conscious effort to buy Fairtrade products, and that needs leadership from this Government. We have already seen leadership from councils across the North. I will mention Derry City Council, which has led on the issue for a number of years. In our town, young people lead the way on the issue. Students from St Mary's College have been major supporters of the movement and have encouraged schools and young people to get on board and to spread the message. The movement is now

very advanced in bringing proper fair trade to our society. It is important that not only local councils but all levels and arms of government commit to being truly fair trade. We can begin that process here.

It is important to remember where the Fairtrade movement came from and why. It came about because we have a very unequal world. We have economic structures that do not allow people living in the poorest regions truly to benefit from the value of their labour. That is the context in which this discussion needs to be set.

People say that there are movements around the world that are against globalisation. However, I remember reading an interview with a member of the Zapatista movement in Mexico, a peasant movement that were protesting against the North American Free Trade Agreement. He was asked, "Are you anti-globalisation?". He said, "No, we are very much in favour of globalisation. We just want a fair go at it as well". That is the point.

In these difficult economic times, it is important to remember that there are places in the world that are much worse off than we are. In this part of the world, we do great work as Governments giving out aid to help such people. However, what people really want is a hand up and not a handout. Everything that the Fairtrade movement does will go a long way, as will everything that we can do as individuals and Governments to support it. In this difficult economic period, we need to remember that other people suffer a lot more. I commend those who tabled the motion.

Ms J McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Like other Members, I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion, which our party supports.

A lot has been said about the Fairtrade movement and the way in which it highlights issues in developing countries and practical ways to help people who live there. Approximately 1.3 billion people live in absolute poverty in the world today. Living in Ireland, we can only imagine the life that those people endure daily. The worst thing is that, for those who are hungry and suffer from a lack of clean water, health facilities and education, it does not have to be that way. That is the biggest crime of all: there is enough food to feed everyone, and there is enough clean water for everyone to drink. It is not about handouts; it is about people looking to see how we can use the earth's resources for everybody.

Everyone has an entitlement to that. When we talk about poverty, we tend to overlook the fact that it is man-made.

As other Members have said, Fairtrade uses this fortnight to highlight how people can be self-sustaining. We have already debated in the Assembly how we can use public procurement to challenge poverty. We talk about creating employment opportunities and regenerating communities in the North of Ireland, but the Executive could go a step further, through the social clauses that are put into public procurement contracts. There is no clear definition of what a social clause is, so we could take a very practical, proactive step and include Fairtrade in that definition. That would go a long way to help.

There are a lot of things that people can do. One of the main issues today is the debt that those developing countries are in. You could cancel that debt, and you could go further and offer no-interest loans to those developing countries. Those are the bigger steps that can be taken, but everybody needs to look at what small, practical steps can be taken. For example, when you buy coffee, you could buy Fairtrade coffee. One Member mentioned that some schools are already doing that. Those small steps can be taken when you buy those commodities to ensure that no one is exploited.

We need to look at what we can do in practical terms. The important thing is that we can change the quality of life for people. The Executive could take that practical step today and include Fairtrade in the definition of social clauses.

Mr Dallat: At the outset, I pay tribute to our former Assembly colleague Carmel Hanna, who kept the all-party group on international development alive during all the times of suspension. On a personal note, I am delighted to support the motion because it accurately reflects the people of Northern Ireland and their generosity towards other parts of the world. The fact that it is an all-party motion adds enormously to the strength and commitment to making a difference to the people of Africa and other developing nations that depend on Fairtrade policies to sell their products in a market that is open-minded and unbiased. Arising out of the motion, I hope that there will be a drive to encourage more councils and other organisations to become involved in promoting fair trade and to go much further in assisting those who need support to develop

self-help initiatives that will become self-sustaining, profitable and a step away from total dependency.

Some Members will know that I served on Coleraine Borough Council for 30 years, and, if I were asked for my most worthwhile achievement, I would say that it was to create a link between Coleraine and one of the most socially deprived areas in the world: Zomba in Malawi. Out of that, the wider community around Coleraine has risen to the challenge and contributed hundreds of thousands of pounds to self-help organisations in that part of Africa over the past 10 years.

4.30 pm

In Coleraine and, I am sure, other places, there is now a greater awareness of fair trade and how it can help people to sell their products in a market that is well disposed and favourable to them. I was cajoled into making my offices in Kilrea and Limavady Fairtrade offices. I suppose that that is one small way of saying that we support fair trade.

The linkage that I mentioned gives real support to people to become sustainable and to encourage them to become involved in the Fairtrade organisation. I know that it makes a difference. It is not a charity as we know a charity to traditionally be, but a partnership that brings enormous benefits. Not only does it bring enormous benefits to the people of Malawi and to those involved but it makes us think about the environment and being less wasteful, because Fairtrade products respect the environment. In reality, it makes us aware of the need to be fair trade-minded when we are doing our shopping.

Since 2001, my wife Anne has been a regular visitor to Malawi, not just to get away from me, of course, but to work with self-help groups, which comprise mostly women, but also farmers. They have had a particularly difficult time in Malawi this year because the crops have failed twice. She tells me that the greatest event in the calendar, apart from Christmas and Easter, is the Fairtrade conference, which happens annually. I have heard the most wonderful stories and seen many photographs of people dressed in their African traditional costumes making their way to the conference, where they get the support, the hope and the inspiration to become entrepreneurs in a world

that is dominated by multinational corporations that are motivated by profit.

Fair trade encourages and promotes the co-operative principle, which changed the lives of people here in Ireland when our people were much worse off than they are today. Now, the same co-operative principles are changing life for the people of Africa. It is a good news story that is worthy of support and which is central to fair trade.

Against a background of continuing poverty and disease, there is real hope, as people prepare for weeks for this wonderful event that focuses on the development of fair trade and how it can help people to help themselves. It really does work. I would love to see every town and village declaring itself a Fairtrade zone, with notices posted on every approach road as a reminder to the public that when they buy goods — it is no longer only tea, coffee and bananas, but a whole range of products — they should consider Fairtrade, not only as a symbolic gesture towards those who are less well off —

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

Mr Dallat: — but as an investment in products of the highest quality. I was going on to mention Fairtrade wine, but you have called time on me. I thoroughly recommend it to anyone who enjoys a tippie.

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I would have been in favour of giving the Member an extra minute to allow him to announce that. However, as Members will know, I am here instead of my colleague Sammy Wilson, who apologises for not being able to be here today. He has asked me to represent him in the debate.

I welcome the debate. Fair trade is about fair terms of trade for farmers and workers and decent working conditions. Key to all of that, as many Members have mentioned, is sustainability in the developing world. I am delighted to join colleagues in supporting Fairtrade Fortnight, the ethos behind the event last night and the motion in the Assembly today.

As we have heard, Fairtrade Fortnight is celebrated annually throughout the world to highlight and raise awareness of fair trade and the concepts of international development. I was pleased that junior Ministers Bell and Anderson were able

to attend the event last night. The comments that they made there were very well thought out, particularly the comments that drew on what happens here in Northern Ireland. We are very much a farming country. As junior Minister Bell said last night, he has always viewed the strength and independence of our farming sector as a source of pride for people in this part of the world, and it would be marvellous to see that sense of pride replicated across the developing world.

This year, as I understand it, the theme of Fairtrade Fortnight is Take a Step. That is aimed at encouraging everyone to make the change to a Fairtrade option. That might be something simple like swapping to Fairtrade tea or asking some of your local shops to stock more Fairtrade choices.

Back in March 2006, the procurement board, now chaired by Minister Wilson, published guidance on the procurement of Fairtrade products to assist public sector buyers in promoting the availability of Fairtrade options and contracts. That commitment, as Members will know, has been in place for some time now, and we should be proud of that.

The guidance defines fair trade and outlines the range of products recognised as Fairtrade products. It also provides advice and guidance on action that can be taken, in so far as EU procurement rules permit. I know that Mr McDevitt made reference to the fact that “out pops the EU directive” — I think that that was the phrase he used. We do, of course, have to have cognisance of the EU procurement rules. However, that does not mean that we should look at them in a negative way. We can look at how we satisfy them to deal with fair trade, which is, I think, the proactive way in which he would like EU procurement rules to be dealt with. The rules are there, but what most Members would like to see is us trying to ensure that Fairtrade options are considered, where appropriate, in our procurement contracts.

Additional guidance was published in 2008 on the procurement of food and catering services. That was a collaborative effort drawing on the expertise of the Central Procurement Directive (CPD), the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and, indeed, the health and education centres of procurement expertise. That advice provides guidance to buyers on integrating sustainable development and healthy

eating objectives into the procurement of food and catering services, including advice on providing Fairtrade options.

That is what has happened to date. What more can we do to support fair trade from the perspective of procurement? As I have indicated, the European Union rules on the issue limit the scope for the public sector to do more to procure Fairtrade goods. However, we want to be as proactive with those rules as we can, and I know that Minister Wilson has instructed his officials to be so. Scope is limited, because procurement rules demand that whatever is specified in a public sector contract is directly relevant to what is being purchased. The term "fair trade" is considered a social issue relating to the management of farms and the workers producing the products, but not actually to the product itself. So, whether a product is fair trade does not affect the end product in the same way as, for example, organic methods would.

Despite that, and despite not being able to specify Fairtrade products, there is clear scope to encourage the inclusion of what are known as fair trade options. However, buyers do need to take into account a number of factors to ensure that the procurement does not fall foul of the legislation. Buyers have to be aware that the inclusion of specific marks or trade names should be avoided. For example, it can be pointed out that where providers do offer fair trade options, the actual Fairtrade mark, or equivalent, is a helpful way of demonstrating that fair trade standards are being met.

The type of procurement contracts that offer the greatest opportunities to procure Fairtrade products are obviously those for catering services or supplies. For example, I know that CPD has awarded a number of contracts that promote the use of Fairtrade products, such as the NICS cleaning, catering and support contract, and the provision of cleaning, waste management, catering and security for the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, as well as encouraging the use of Fairtrade tea and coffee for hospitality.

So far, I have addressed the central government arena. As Members know, local government falls outside the remit of Northern Ireland public procurement policy, and councils are not required to follow the procurement board policy. However, they are encouraged to do so on a voluntary basis, and I am encouraged

by the involvement of councils in promoting Fairtrade and in running events. Of course, Belfast was one of the first areas to have that Fairtrade status. Belfast has recently had its dual status as a Fairtrade city renewed for a further two years until November 2013, and it is supporting a number of activities during the fortnight. I think that Bangor was the most recently accredited Fairtrade town, and we were delighted to see that.

Members will be aware that the European Commission published proposals for a new procurement directive before Christmas, and my colleague Minister Wilson made strong representation reflecting the policy emphasis and the nature of the economic environment in Northern Ireland. That includes softening the link to the subject matter of the contract, so that additional social and economic benefit can be taken into consideration in the award of such a contract. It is not clear as yet whether the proposals, once agreed, will open up the potential for further addressing fair trade and other social objectives within procurement. Of course, the proposals may change during the negotiation process, so unfortunately nothing is guaranteed.

I will touch briefly on some of the comments made by colleagues. In proposing the motion on behalf of the group, Mr McDevitt gave us the background to fair trade and indicated that it should be a supplement and not a substitute for local trade, and that is an important point. Of course, he referred to the European Union directive, which I have mentioned.

Mr Hamilton praised the all-party group, as did others, and talked about raising the economic well-being of developing countries. Of course, that is the key element because, as Mr Eastwood said, we want to give a hand up and not a handout in those cases. He talked about the impact that it had on working conditions and referred to the limited flexibility of procurement, as I would expect him to.

Mr McCarthy educated me today. He told me about Black Abbey. I knew about Greyabbey, but I did not know about Black Abbey.

Mr McCarthy: It is a townland.

Mrs Foster: I am delighted to hear about it today. He referred to a local lady who did a lot. One of the benefits of these motions is that it

allows us to refer to local people who do a lot of good work, in this case in relation to fair trade.

Jennifer McCann referred to the need to widen social clauses. I am advised that sustainability requirements may be incorporated into the technical specifications of a public tender provided that the criteria are linked to the subject matter of the contract in question. Therefore, there is room to do more on public procurement. She went on to talk about cancelling the debt of African and other developing countries. I remind the House that we have a very extensive international aid package that goes out from Westminster, but, at present, we are paying £120 million a day in interest for our own debt in the United Kingdom, and we have to acknowledge that we ourselves have debt issues that need to be dealt with.

Mr Dallat said that he had been involved in the issue for quite some time and that he was personally delighted to be involved. I have talked about the theme of Fairtrade Fortnight and referred to Take a Step. He took a step by making his constituency offices Fairtrade offices, and other Members could look to that as well.

On behalf of the Minister of Finance and Personnel, I am content to continue to support and encourage Fairtrade options to be required within the context of European Union law and the efficient and effective use of public expenditure and, of course, as he would expect me to say, the delivery of best value for money for the taxpayer. Mr Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to respond to the debate.

Mr Wells: I thank everyone who took part in the debate and welcome the fact that we had support from all corners of the House. In his usual very articulate manner, Conall McDevitt outlined the importance of fair trade and painted the picture for many of us. He indicated that this was not just an issue about a fair price for products, but also looked at issues such as sustainability, environmental protection and the rights of workers. Therefore, fair trade goes well beyond what many of us may have understood before this debate.

4.45 pm

He also pointed out the gross inequalities in trade: the rich, affluent West has a very strong advantage over the small producer in sub-Saharan Africa and many other parts of the world. I was

encouraged to hear that Fairtrade sustains eight million people in 63 countries and that sales are worth a large £1.17 billion per annum, but — this “but” is very clear — each week, we as a nation spend £1 on Fairtrade products in each household. Could one imagine the dramatic impact on poor, subsistence level farmers and producers throughout the world if that was increased to £10 a week?

Mr McDevitt also made a point that worries me intensely, which is that when people talk about Fairtrade products, they automatically think of tea and coffee. I am a bit of a health freak; I never take tea or coffee. I try to avoid them if I can.

Mr Dallat: What about wine?

Mr Wells: I certainly do not take wine — never, never.

It is important that people like me look at the wide range of other Fairtrade options. Indeed, I think that it was Mr Copeland who said that there were 4,000 separate products, so we have to remove the blinkered view that we are simply talking about a small and finite range of Fairtrade products.

The recurring theme was procurement and its importance. The Minister and many others were quick to highlight the problems that we face under European directives. It always strikes me as interesting that the most enthusiastic supporters of our membership of the European Union are the quickest to condemn the restrictions under which it places our Government when it comes to exercising flexibility in our trading relationships with others. However, that is a debate on a slightly political point.

Mr McDevitt also mentioned the role taken by the Welsh Assembly. The very least that we should do as a Province is to follow the example of another small devolved Government within the United Kingdom. I do not believe that we have gone that far.

Simon Hamilton praised the work of the all-party group and said that Northern Ireland could, at times, be too insular, which is very true. He mentioned the abject poverty of many primary producers in the rest of the world. He was absolutely right when he said that Fairtrade Fortnight and the whole aspect of fair trade is not simply a matter of giving additional money to farmers in poor countries. It also forces us to think as a nation about what we are doing

to help those who are in a much less affluent position than us.

We have to be absolutely clear that the poorest person in Northern Ireland is fabulously wealthy in comparison with someone living in somewhere such as Mauritania, parts of India or Zambia. That is not to belittle those who have problems in our society, but we have to be realistic. I have seen for myself just how abject that poverty is in many Third World countries. You could not possibly compare our situation with theirs.

Robin Swann made an interesting comment on how rapidly Fairtrade has grown in recent years. There has been a more than ten-fold increase since 1998. However, he then made a comment that I cannot agree with: he tried to compare the difficulties of farmers here, and there are real difficulties in the farming communities in Northern Ireland, with those of farmers in poorer countries. However, it must be remembered that those trying to eke out an existence in somewhere such as Zimbabwe or Mozambique do not have £230 million worth of European subsidies in the form of single-farm payments coming into their coffers. I support that, and I think that it is right, but it places farmers in western Europe at a huge advantage compared with those trying to produce goods in other countries. Therefore, we have to be very careful that we do not try to equate rural poverty in Northern Ireland with the abject poverty of people living on less than a dollar a day, as Ms McCann suggested. No one in rural or urban parts of Northern Ireland has to live on less than a dollar a day.

Kieran McCarthy, once again, got the opportunity to mention his patch, Ards, and the work of Carol Press from Black Abbey. I thought that he said "Blackadder". I had heard of Greyabbey but never Black Abbey.

Mr McCarthy: There were friars at that spot.

Mr Wells: You learn something every day.

Mr McCarthy highlighted the need for a fair and sustainable price for goods and used a useful phrase about allowing people to buy themselves out of poverty.

Colum Eastwood also said that it is not a handout but a hand up, which is a very relevant phrase to use. Kieran mentioned the fact that so many people live on a dollar a day. He also

indicated that quite a few towns in Northern Ireland have adopted Fairtrade status, including Dundonald, Antrim and Bangor in north Down; that is very welcome. To a large extent, local government has led the way on the issue.

Michael Copeland gave us an interesting update on how Fairtrade has evolved in the United Kingdom, having started 40 years ago. He wants the Executive to follow the example of our towns and cities, and he is absolutely right. Very unusually, it is our district councils that are leading the way on Fairtrade and giving encouragement to the Executive.

Colum Eastwood, who unfortunately could not remain, gave us the example of Londonderry city council's work on fair trade. We welcome the fact that, along with Belfast, our second city, Londonderry, has led the way on this important issue. I was very interested in his comment about the Mexican farmers who say that they favour globalisation, provided that they get a fair crack of the whip in international trade.

Jennifer McCann was the first Member to quote the dreadful statistic that 1.3 billion people live in abject poverty, the definition of which is living on less than \$1 a day. When you see the existence that people eke out, you see the importance of proper fair trade. She made a slightly controversial suggestion that fair trade should be included in a social clause in government procurement. Not everyone will agree with that. The spirit is fine, but not everyone can sign up to the concept of social clauses.

John Dallat quite rightly paid tribute to Carmel Hanna once again. I was a founding member of the all-party group on international development way back in 1998 when the Assembly got up and running. There is absolutely no doubt that there were many occasions on which that group would have died on its feet had it not been for the persistence of Carmel Hanna; she just kept at it. It is a testimony to what she has achieved that we are still discussing these issues. When the Assembly was suspended for four or five years, had she not kept the group going, it would have collapsed and we would probably not be discussing the issue here today. Northern Ireland would be the poorer for that.

Mr Ford: I wish to join in the tribute that the Member and John Dallat have paid to Carmel. Will he also tell us about the work that he did on the Assembly Commission in the early days to ensure that this institution had Fairtrade policies?

Mr Wells: I had the privilege of serving on the Commission in the early days of the Assembly. I got all-party support from the five parties that were represented on the Commission to start the ball rolling as far as Fairtrade policy in this Building is concerned. If we, as an Assembly, do not take a lead in some small way, we cannot lecture the Executive, district councils or public bodies. In some small way, the Commission took a lead on the matter at a time when it was not a particularly attractive proposition. We pay tribute to Carmel Hanna once again, and we are glad that she is still campaigning, albeit in a different role and no longer as an MLA.

We have all listened with interest about the fascinating work that Coleraine Borough Council is doing in Zomba in Malawi; Coleraine has led the way in that twinning arrangement. There is a tendency in Northern Ireland to twin with somewhere in Bermuda, Barbados or the Bahamas. There is not the same stampede to twin with a very poor part of the world such as Malawi, so I pay tribute to Coleraine for leading the way on that important issue.

John Dallat emphasised the fact that it is not only about sustainability but that there is an emphasis on the protection of the environment. I had the privilege of attending a seminar in the Long Gallery last night at which a farmer from El Salvador gave a first-hand account of the importance of Fairtrade to his community.

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

Mr Wells: One hundred and twenty-five families there are sustained almost entirely through Fairtrade, and that has to be commended.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges Fairtrade Fortnight; notes the adoption of Fairtrade procurement policies by many branches of local and central government; and calls on the Executive to review Fairtrade procurement policy with a view to supporting Fairtrade when and where possible.

Motion made:

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

Adjournment

Parkgate Quarry, County Antrim

Mr Deputy Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes to speak, and the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. All other Members who are called to speak will have seven minutes.

Mr Kinahan: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thought that I had only 10 minutes. I am very grateful for the chance to talk about Parkgate quarry today, but I am sad that it is necessary to do so. I am also grateful to the Minister for taking the time to be here, particularly when we have met him at other times. However, I want to raise new issues and concerns, and I am keen to know where the application has gone. I am grateful that the Minister withdrew the application, or got it withdrawn, from Antrim Borough Council, and I look forward to hearing about what he feels is the next stage. Yet I hope that a next stage does not exist and that this is the end of it.

I need to declare an interest, as I live 1.5 miles away and next to the haulage route listed in one of the conditions. I also need to declare an interest as Danny Kennedy's Assembly private secretary, which means that I cannot raise the issue of roads directly. I will leave that to other Members, if they feel that that is necessary. I would like to concentrate on other matters today, including enforcement.

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, this is not a case of Nimbyism. There are very real reasons for securing today's debate. Under normal circumstances, the planning application would not have been approved once all the points, especially all the negative ones, had been taken together. I feel that that point needs to be raised strongly today. We are not against recycling or either of the planned uses for the quarry, and if a different route were available, be it across fields or along other roads, that might

have been a better way. However, we do not want it to go ahead at all.

I am grateful to the Minister for visiting Parkgate during the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) conference. I got a text saying:

"We have seen Mr Attwood on the Connor Road".

So I am grateful to him for looking at the site and taking the issue on board. Parkgate is a rural country village. It has one street or, arguably, two streets with a T-junction. It has four housing estates full of families, a primary school, a pub, shops, a chippy, a bridal shop and one or two other shops. It is very much a family village. According to the latest electoral register, its population is 2,251, of which, I assume, about 1,500 live in the village. It is a typical rural village, with children, dogs, bicyclists, riders and a farming community. It has parking problems, with traffic moving in, out and around to get to the shops. It is a through point for traffic running from Kells and Ballymena to the M2 and from Ballyclare and Doagh to Antrim. It is a very, very busy little town when it comes to traffic.

Throughout all this, the feeling in Parkgate and the surrounding area has been that a big company was pushing the plans. It is not quite bullying, but it does feel like heavy-handedness. Henry Brothers has not once come to speak to the people of Parkgate, despite my offers on two occasions. I was hopeful that its representatives would come to see, listen and understand the problem. Sadly, that has not happened, but it might happen yet. I do not think that those people would put the same number of lorries through their village.

A letter dated 4 July from Scottish lawyers Maclay, Murray and Spens to Joanne Doherty of the Planning Service seemed particularly heavy-handed and almost threatening. One comment indicated that the firm was annoyed that MLAs had taken up the local interest. Yet that is our job, and we must put that across. If you read it another way, it looked as though the firm was threatening the Planning Service and telling it how to do its job.

5.00 pm

One big question that, we feel, has not been properly answered is whether the quarry is still in use. When I was a small child, I could hear it being quarried. I am now 54 years old. I remember the last blasting in that quarry

40 years ago. To most of us, it has remained dormant since then. Licences for smaller uses, not necessarily quarrying, have been applied for two or three times. We believe that the quarry is unused. We believe that it is very likely to have been listed as a disused quarry in the review of old mineral permissions. However, when we asked for that list, we were told that it was not available to the public. Immediately, we all felt that something was being hidden. We want to know whether Parkgate quarry is on that list. We also want to know whether the list existed when planning applications were made and whether it was then shelved and for what reasons. In the meantime, over the past 40 years, Parkgate has gone from having probably 250 to 2,250 inhabitants — perhaps, many more. More cars go through the village. They are faster. There are bigger lorries. There are many more children and horses. Yet, we are still dealing with a planning application from that time that allows the quarry to be used as such.

I also want to mention the strange use of negative conditions that seems to have come up. As I have said, if you look at all the issues cumulatively, you really should say no to the entire planning application. You could liken it to a tree preservation order for a wood that protects all trees initially. A developer could go in and ask, "Which trees?". Eventually, he narrows it down to the important trees and looks at those that he feels are ill and should be taken down because they are dangerous. You would end up with very few trees, and the developer would be allowed to build. That is how, we feel, those negative conditions are being placed. There is a series of conditions. They can knock them down one by one until, eventually, two or three owners are left with all the pressure on them to sell and let the development happen. That is plain wrong. I wonder whether negative conditions of that type are a normal way forward — I have not seen that before — or whether a worrying precedent is now being set.

I want to raise strongly the hydrological matter. Stories about the quarry are that it leaked and that is why its use was stopped. We have been told of one case when dye was put into the quarry and it came out in various other locations. There are 13, 14 or 15 farms that get water from the quarry. The legal letter that I mentioned indicates that there are no concerns because there is no toxic waste. Yet, we need to ensure that enforcement exists so that there

is never toxic waste from building materials. That is a dangerous assumption to put in place. Therefore, we ask the Minister to ensure that an independent hydrological study is put in place with conditions before anything commences, so that we know that it is safe before it starts. At our meeting with the Minister, he certainly said that he would get one organised. However, he seemed to say that it would happen afterwards. Therefore, when it comes to enforcement, which is our greatest concern with all the negative conditions, I asked the Minister to put in place a quick enforcement system, with the right penalties if necessary, that will allow people in the neighbourhood to report breaches, have them dealt with as quickly as possible and, if necessary, stop the quarry operating until those matters have been dealt with, if, indeed, that development has to go ahead.

The same legal letter implies that Henry Brothers already has all the necessary owner's rights. However, we are led to believe that two of the four passing bays do not have the right sight lines and are owned by third parties. That is why we need to have enforcement in place. We are also told that the sight lines for the two or three accesses to the quarry are also not owned by Henry Brothers. That is what I meant when I said that unnecessary pressure would be put on those owners, as each skittle or tree is knocked down from the negative conditions.

I also ask the Minister to attach further planning conditions to protect the town during rush hour and drop-off times. Those are the times when the town is at its busiest, and adding 10 or 20 lorries to the traffic will only make it much worse and more dangerous. On the roads issue, the layout of the junction seems sensible, but I would like to know whether it works before commencement is allowed.

The debate on noise levels is still to be concluded. There is much good mitigating advice on what is to be done, yet it seems that two different measurements are being followed. The residents in and around Parkgate want to know for sure that, if it is noisy, they will be able to deal with it and that the right enforcement proceedings are in place. From one or two things that happened in connection with the Nutts Corner racetracks during my time in Antrim Borough Council, I know that the present system is phenomenally slow.

Minister, you have heard that I am against the application in its current form. I and all the

residents are particularly uncomfortable with the mass of negative conditions. We need to have good, slick enforcement in place. I hope that, as they go through their speeches, all my colleagues from South Antrim will add much more detail on many of these matters. Please, let us see Parkgate surviving as the good little town that it is and not being wrecked. I know that it was a decision by a previous Assembly that has left us where we are, but I am here, and I want to see Parkgate protected.

Mr T Clarke: I thank the honourable Member for South Antrim for securing the Adjournment debate. The last thing that he said was that this is the result of a decision made by a previous Assembly. To the best of my knowledge, the intention to make this decision is recent and will be taken by the current Minister in the current Assembly.

Although I look across the Chamber at the Minister of the Environment, who is responsible for the Planning Service, much of what I want to focus on is on roads, which is in the portfolio of another Minister. There are many roads issues that to me, as a layperson, do not seem to have been addressed, and the residents of the Parkgate area have the same concerns. Roads Service is a consultee of the Planning Service, and it is interesting that it does not seem to have raised any objections to this application. That contrasts with the view of one official, who, I am led to believe, was of the opinion during the past 12 months that the application should be turned down from a roads point of view. There seems to have been a Damascene conversion in the minds of Roads Service officials, who came to a different opinion. I would like to know what brought about that change of mind, and it would have been useful to hear the views of the Minister for Regional Development, rather than the Minister responsible for the Planning Service.

My colleague from South Antrim referred to the environmental issues in relation to the quarry. That is an area that we are all concerned about, regardless of whether the application is for Parkgate or anywhere else. The quarry will have environmental impacts, and we in the farming community are also concerned about those. Danny touched on those concerns when he addressed the issues of water pollution and suchlike.

My next point goes back to the roads issue. I was struck by the pictures supplied by residents

that showed what it would look like with large lorries using a road that does not have adequate passing bays. It has been suggested that more passing bays will be provided, but there is a question mark over the ownership of the land and whether Roads Service has the right to allow those passing bays. Therefore, we are looking at using third-party lands to provide that instrument to facilitate the quarry.

Danny said that much of this was in the previous term. I disagree: it was obviously a current application until it was pulled last week or the week before because other issues had come to light. The Minister of Justice — I suppose that I should call him Mr Ford today — raised the matter and pulled it from a council application two weeks ago, for which we should thank him, because it has kept the debate alive.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for giving way. In regard to the legal documents that were referred to earlier, it was actually pointed out that assurances were given to the clients at the Stormont meeting in February by both the then Minister Mr Poots and John Cummins on behalf of the Planning Service that, provided they met the reasonable requirements of the statutory consultees, the applications would be determined at the earliest possible opportunity. Surely for that to progress by then, Roads Service and the previous Minister must have signed off on it?

Mr T Clarke: That is very interesting. Along with my colleague Paul Girvan and the MP for the area, Rev McCrea, I met the current roads Minister to raise some of our concerns about this. If something has been signed off, it is hard to comprehend why, if a Minister is still in place and these concerns have been raised, they could not be addressed by the Minister who holds the portfolio at the time.

I listened today to what Danny Kinahan said in relation to junction improvements and how they would work. Even though he is the Minister's Assembly Private Secretary, it seems that he is somewhat concerned about whether those junction improvements will work. It is putting doubt in the Minister's Department at the moment. Enough concerns have been raised for the Minister to look further into that issue. Many issues were raised on that day when we met some months ago — certainly it was late last year when we met the Minister who is currently responsible for Roads Service. My colleague

Mr Girvan will probably be of the same mind: many of the issues that were raised on that day were never addressed, right down to the thought of having passing bays. There are corners on that road that are entirely blind, and with eight-wheeler lorries going round corners on the wrong side of the road meeting oncoming traffic, it is difficult to comprehend how that can be justified and how the rest of the motorists and the people who live in the area can be convinced that that can happen in a safe manner.

That does not take away, however, from the concept of using the quarries for another purpose. As I have said, it does not matter which area a quarry is in; most people have concerns about their use. It is an argument not about the previous use of the quarry but about what it is intended to be used for in the future. That is what has raised most concern. People have a general expectation that, if a quarry has been there for many years — Danny is a bit older than me; he said he is 54, and I am only coming 45 — it will come to the end of its useful life at some stage. Most of the people in Parkgate welcomed the fact that that time had come but are now disappointed that an application is in.

Danny referred to the building firm in his opening remarks. I suppose that the flip side of that is that we have to accommodate that firm so that it can carry on its recycling business. It is about getting the balance right so that we do not create environmental problems and road problems and about getting the right location so that that business can go on. That business is creating employment in a difficult time, and that is important. It is about getting a balance between that and the effect on people's lives.

As Danny said, Parkgate is a small but growing village, but to put that amount of traffic through it will put added pressure on the people who live there. I welcome the purpose of this debate. It is just disappointing that it is only an Adjournment topic, which does not mean all that much other than we get an opportunity to have a conversation about it. As I said, the conversation has been going on for some time, but neither Roads Service nor the Planning Service has changed its mind.

Mr McLaughlin: Go raibh míle maith agat. I thank my colleague Danny Kinahan for securing the debate. I, too, welcome the attendance of

the Minister of the Environment and the interest that he has demonstrated in this case.

With any planning application, there are issues that have to be considered. Clearly, an underpinning economic and environmental rationale has been applied to the business case in order to support it. Whether you support or oppose the proposition, you have to recognise that the arguments for it have to be balanced against the counterarguments on the impacts that it would have. We clearly have a demonstration that this is a controversial proposition that directly affects the local community. The opposition is not contrived but is very sincere, and they raise genuine issues. They appear to be dealing with a big business interest that is impervious to the arguments because there has been no engagement and no response to the issues. It could be that some of the issues or some of the fears that are being articulated by local residents and local representatives could have been addressed, but it seems that, in prosecuting the application, there is no real engagement or concern about the issues that were being brought forward.

5.15 pm

My remarks are directed to the Minister, because I know that he reflects carefully on these issues. He has some background and experience in law, and he knows that there is a real possibility that the application could be judicially reviewed. Therefore, he has to proceed with careful attention to detail, but I argue strenuously that there are significant local concerns. This has been in process since 2005, but, even at this advanced stage, there is ample opportunity to pay attention to the detail and attempt to alleviate the concerns. It is incumbent on the Assembly, not only the representatives for South Antrim, to indicate that we will take cognisance of local concerns, particularly when they are grounded in factual reality.

People know what the roads system is like and the consequences of bringing in heavy traffic. We are talking about 2,000 tons a week, so this is massive. There is also a return journey for processed waste back to Belfast. The impact on a small rural community can only be imagined, and that is only one aspect of it. There have been concerns about the effect on groundwater, but, for some reason that is incomprehensible to me, no one has addressed that formally or scientifically or attempted to persuade those

who had to be persuaded that there would be no detriment. The local farming community in particular has drawn attention to that repeatedly.

If the issues remain unresolved, it is difficult to see a Minister setting them aside also. There is an onus, which I believe the Minister will address, to protect the local community or to ensure that a process is put in place, whether that is by public examination, to establish whether the concerns can be addressed or resolved or whether the application should fail because the concerns cannot be addressed and because the impact on the local community would be greater than the benefit of opening one more site. I have a schedule of all the waste treatment plants in that general area, the circle around greater Belfast. At one level, it is quite impressive, and, at another level, it is depressing because it speaks to the volume of waste that we produce. If the application is dealt with on the basis of the arguments, in my view there can only be one conclusion, which is that it should be turned down or referred for public inquiry.

Mr Ford: I congratulate my colleague Danny Kinahan on securing the debate, and I declare an interest as a member of the church committee of Second Donegore Presbyterian Church, which abuts the site. In that context, I correct Danny slightly. He said that the quarry had not been worked for 40 years. I can confirm that there was at least one blast in the face of the quarry on a day in June 1975, because it happened during my wedding ceremony. At that point, all the Fords jumped up because, whatever part of the country they came from, they were unaware that there was a working quarry down the road. All my in-laws said, "Oh there they go again". However, it was certainly very shortly after that in the early 1980s that the quarry ceased to be used, and it has been effectively abandoned since then. I believe that, under the ROMP legislation, it should be regarded as abandoned. Indeed, its most recent use was as a film set, which I suspect is not particularly good as a precedent for a waste transfer station.

Following on from the points that Mitchel McLaughlin made, it seems to me that there is a fundamental question whether Parkgate quarry is the right place for what is proposed. The concept of carting several hundred tons or, perhaps, a couple of thousand tons a week 20 miles out of Belfast — it will overwhelmingly come from Belfast — for processing to then

transport 80% of it back to Belfast either for reuse or, potentially, for shipping to the Far East in many cases, does not seem to me, particularly given the narrowness of the Connor Road, the access to the quarry and the steepness of the hill as it goes down into the village, to be a particularly good example of a best practice environmental option. However, the Minister has to deal with the application that is there, and it seems to me, I regret to say, that we have an illustration of how the Planning Service has failed to handle this application well. In Antrim borough and in the Ballymena planning division, we have, over the years, seen a very good and very professional service, but it seems to me that this issue, which is a much more significant application than many that go through the local office, has been treated in a considerably less professional way.

I spent two lengthy sessions in Millennium House going through the files, and the level of detail that appears on those files and the quality of the plans and maps is far worse than one normally sees in County Hall in Ballymena for far smaller applications. Indeed, they are far worse than you would expect to see for a single dwelling in the countryside. Plans are in poor detail and are, in many cases, on an inadequate scale to show whether the issues that have concerned local people, particularly about roads, have been addressed. Passing bays are shown that either the applicant or Roads Service claim control over. Sight lines for the two accesses are not shown adequately. Indeed, one of the accesses is shown on the plans with the sight line going outside the blue line of the applicant's ownership. On the other one, the access sight lines are not shown at all, and there is inadequate scale to determine whether they infringe on third-party land. It is my belief that they do. I understand that, at a meeting that roads engineers had with one of the local landowners last week, they acknowledged that a passing bay that would be required will intrude onto third-party land. However, the plans are accepted at the moment, as all land is either under the control of the applicants or of Roads Service. The fact that Roads Service somehow managed to approve an apparent passing bay on one of the steepest parts of the road almost beside a blind bend on which there was a fatality just a couple of years ago as a place that it expects the driver of a 20-ton lorry to pull into to stop while going up a steep hill seems to

be a long way short of a realistic way of treating the needs of that area.

In the context of having declared my membership of the church committee, I will say that there is a blue line on the plans that claims ownership and control of an area of land that has been leased to Second Donegore Church for 999 years as a car park. That happened within the past 30 years or so. I suspect that none of the current applicants will be alive when they regain control of that land, and I do not see how anybody can claim control of land that they have leased for 999 years when that land is required for one of the sound bunds that has been applied for.

Similarly, the issue of water has been raised. It is my understanding, having been involved in the issue about 25 years ago, that a similar application failed to make progress because it was impossible to carry out the necessary hydrological survey to show that there was not a potential problem with water quality. However, there is very little on file to suggest that that water quality issue, which affects a number of neighbouring farms, has been addressed at this stage.

The sound issue has been addressed in a way that acknowledges that sound limits would be exceeded at two properties, and, in one case, the sound level was taken at Dunamuggly Primary School, which has been closed for some years. It sits behind Second Donegore Church at a slightly lower level further away from the quarry, and, therefore, one must assume that the church will have a worse defect than the school, yet that has been accepted by the Planning Service as a valid area, even though the sound level at the old school building is inappropriate.

So we have what is effectively an abandoned quarry — it would, I believe, be treated as such in any reasonable way — being regarded as if it is of working quality, given the suggestions being made that it could continue as a working quarry without any different planning permission. We have issues of roads access not being addressed properly and major issues about land ownership in relation to the roads requirements. We have issues of water quality not being addressed, further issues of the potential for traffic congestion around a very narrow and awkward corner in a growing village and serious issues about the potential threat

to the viability of the main shop and the other takeaway food shops in the area, where there would be the biggest congestion. All of that, as Danny Kinahan said in his opening remarks, is to be covered by negative conditions.

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

Mr Ford: I am grateful to the Minister for his intervention on two occasions to have this withdrawn from Antrim Borough Council. We will need to hear more from him.

Ms Lewis: I thank the Member for securing this debate. The debate highlights a very important issue for the residents of Parkgate, which is situated in my constituency. Parkgate is a small village, as has already been stated, situated just outside Templepatrick, a short distance off the main road to Belfast International Airport. Despite an understanding that the plans relating to the quarry were being shelved after over 400 objections were received in response to the consultation, residents, as well as local councillors, were shocked to see the application up for approval. Subsequently, it has been deferred at the request of the Minister, who is present in the House. Although one has to take into consideration the planning policies in relation to that application, the volume of objections received demonstrates local feelings towards the plan. Despite that, the Planning Service, through its willingness to approve the application, is ignoring the views of the residents who oppose the application.

Granting approval to the application will result in an increase in noise levels, not only from the increased volume of traffic because of lorries transporting earth from the quarry through the small village but from machinery present on the site itself. That would be unacceptable and would disturb the lives of those living in the village and damage their quality of life. I also have concerns, which are shared by the community, for the safety of people living on or beside Connor Road, which is the main route to and from the quarry. Lorries would be required to travel through Parkgate's main street and would pose a major risk to road users, whether they are car users or pedestrians.

The applicant has proposed the construction of passing bays at certain parts of the road in order to control the flow of traffic and ensure safety. However, a family car is no match for these lorries, especially as the road is a country

road. Therefore, I have significant road safety concerns for the residents, particularly the children living in the area. Some residents' property will also be directly affected in order to facilitate the approval of the application, which is not acceptable in my opinion. I am also concerned about the levels of dust that would be created in the area as a result of the planning application and the increased traffic. That could present hazardous conditions for residents, especially new residents who have moved into the area in recent years.

The application poses a number of pertinent questions. What has the Planning Service done to address the concerns raised throughout the consultation? The residents of Parkgate deserve a say on the application, and I am concerned that the Planning Service, through the time delay between the two applications related to the proposal, is refusing those newly established residents their say. Since the initial application, the number of residents of Parkgate has grown, and those changes must be taken into consideration. Therefore, I urge the Minister to look carefully at the application and give consideration to the people of Parkgate.

Mr Girvan: I thank Danny for securing this evening's debate. It is important that we highlight a few of the issues. We are dealing with what is a very idyllic part of the countryside. The history goes back quite some time in relation to the application, as Mr Ford mentioned. As far back as 25 years ago there were issues associated with the site.

I wish to go back only to 2005, when it came on the scene. The local community raised extreme opposition to that application. Some of the concerns that they had were about the road, the disruption to the village and the additional traffic through it, and the watercourse in the area. I do not know whether the Department has had an investigation into this, but a number of the farms and homes in the area have taken advantage of the opportunity to sink their own boreholes. They, therefore, accept their water from spring wells and suchlike. They do not rely on mains water. A number of people in the area have made that choice. They have a right to make that choice, and we do not have the right to pollute their water.

5.30 pm

At the time of the previous application, it was stated that Connor Road was unsafe for vehicles of the

size that would use it and that, as a condition, it would have to be widened. We are talking about passing bays now. At that time, they were talking about widening the road along its entire length.

Mr T Clarke: Does the Member accept that if there was a suggestion in 2005 to widen the road, it should not be done at the expense of the public purse? Surely it would have been a condition that the contractor providing the land should bring that road up to standard rather than the matter being left for the public purse to pick up at a later date. If that was considered then, has it taken so long because they were unable to do that at that time?

Mr Girvan: I very much take on board the comments of my colleague, but in doing so, I will say that I am not exactly sure why that did not happen. I reckon that it is because negotiations could not be dealt with in relation to getting the ownership to allow it to happen. Therefore, the land could not be vested because it was not an issue. It was only to facilitate a private development. The infrastructure argument was not being made on the basis that the Department could have taken it.

In light of the point that has been made, the fact is that, at that stage, Roads Service stated that the road had to be widened to accommodate the vehicular movements. The number of vehicular movements on the present application is for 20 vehicles per hour. I do not know whether everybody in the Chamber has been to Parkgate village, but I can tell you that that means 20 vehicles per hour going to and from a site. The village corner is not the easiest to manoeuvre around either. There is a difficulty: some of the vehicles will have to go over the central line to make it into that road. That is another issue.

As the Department of the Environment and the Planning Service are the bodies that will rubber-stamp the decision, they very much have to take on board and address all these issues. From looking at some of the consultation responses, I am not so sure that they have all been addressed. Some of the issues that we are raising today are valid. Relying on negative conditions in a planning application is a very weak stick to lean on. It is like relying on a broken stick. Once you have allowed a certain thing to happen and expect enforcement to deal with it, you are somewhat closing the door after the horse has bolted. That is a difficulty. I do not

believe that we should be looking at that. All the negative conditions do not mean that the thing cannot go ahead.

Other points have been made about noise. The measurements that were put forward and the testing points in relation to the decibels that were migrating from the site to adjacent properties were excessively — not marginally — in excess of the agreed limits. We heard that some conditions would be put in place, such as closing doors in the areas in which machinery is being operated to manage the waste product and break it down.

Having worked in certain parts of industry, I can say that when working in a dusty, noisy environment, sometimes the easiest thing to do is open the doors and let it out. Not doing so may be a planning approval condition, but it can be one that is somewhat difficult to enforce.

There is also an issue in relation to some of the wildlife — animals and birds — in the area. We all know that quarries can be and are used by nesting birds, such as kestrels and others. That issue has not been properly addressed through the process. However, as far as I am concerned, Roads Service and the Planning Service are involved in what goes forward. I appreciate that the application was pulled from the schedule to allow us to come forward but I ask that this be looked at in detail to ensure that concerns are addressed.

The fact is that the application includes a red line around areas that are not owned by the applicant. Nor is there an agreement with landowners to include such land. If that were the case, and that is one of the points —

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

Mr Girvan: Yes. That is one of the points that I wanted to highlight. When applications are put in, it is important that we ensure that the applicant owns or has a signed agreement for the use of red-lined areas.

Mr Wells: Members will look at me and ask why a Member for South Down is contributing to a debate about a quarry in South Antrim. I am very aware that I am treading on eggshells by taking part in the debate. I have no doubt that Mr Kinahan, on the Bench to my right, is looking quite shocked and surprised. I must declare why I am taking part in the debate. I am the

chairman of the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group, the main purpose of which is the study and protection of rare birds of prey in Northern Ireland. As a result, I am a regular visitor to Parkgate quarry. Indeed, I remember that during one of my early visits — probably during the referendum period on the Belfast Agreement — there was a rather uncomplimentary poster about the honourable Member for South Antrim Mr Ford on a lamp post outside the quarry. I am glad to say that I think he is a lot more popular in Parkgate now than he clearly was then because, had my face been on that poster, I would have been almost suicidal.

I go to that quarry because Professor David Bellamy, who is one of the world's leading authorities on botany and zoology, caused a great deal of controversy a few years ago when he said that there should be more, not fewer, quarries in the United Kingdom. Why would he have made that extraordinary comment? Quite simply, the fact is that abandoned quarries become wildlife refuges, often in the middle of a green desert, and none more so than Parkgate quarry.

I cannot comment on the roads or the views of residents, but I can say that I am a wee bit concerned that the nature conservation value of Parkgate quarry has been overlooked in all the arguments. It has been used by nesting peregrine falcons on at least three occasions. Pairs of peregrines regularly hang around the quarry and attempt to nest, so it is important for a schedule 1 species. The quarry is a regular nesting site for kestrel, which is most definitely schedule 1 and, therefore, specially protected, and it is used annually by species such as raven, grey wagtail and sand martin. In the greater south Antrim countryside, those species are under enormous pressure. Yet, we seem to be giving permission for something that will remove all that wildlife interest.

Unfortunately, the fate of quarries in South Antrim — all of which I have been in many times — is to be worried about. Tardree, or Ladyhill as it is known, has been passed to become a waste disposal site. If it develops like that, the wildlife interest will eventually disappear. What happened at Ballyclare quarry was an absolute tragedy. The most wonderful wildlife site that I have ever encountered in South Antrim was totally obliterated when planning permission was given for a housing development. I was very much involved in that planning application. Massive assurances and negative conditions

that were attached to protect the wildlife were completely ignored by the developer, and the area was destroyed as a wildlife spectacle. Therefore, the emphasis should not be only on the community.

I know the road at Parkgate well, and it is totally unsuitable for large lorries, but by giving permission for the development, we will lose yet another little jewel in our countryside: an area where we can take our children to show them newts and all sorts of interesting rare fauna and flora will be gone. There must be more suitable industrial sites for this kind of undertaking elsewhere in greater Belfast.

From an environmental point of view — I speak as one who, beyond the wildlife aspects, does not know an awful lot about this site — it cannot be sound to spend vast amounts of time and money in burning carbon to take waste the whole way to Parkgate and then the whole way back into Belfast. From an environmental point of view, that just does not seem to be on. Therefore, a full environmental impact assessment should have been carried out on this application and the very strong ecological and environmental arguments should have been taken into consideration.

If I have caused offence to the honourable Members for South Antrim by making this contribution, I apologise, but when I saw this item on the Order Paper, I could not simply stand by and do nothing and watch yet another site be destroyed. I have been in every quarry in Northern Ireland many, many times in my 30 years of involvement in the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group and, one by one, I have seen them disappear as wildlife refuges. The problem is that they have a deemed industrial use, through quarrying, which makes it easier for other developers to come in, take them over and use them for alternative developments, some of which are a lot less environmentally sound than quarrying.

You raised the issue of the review of old mineral permissions (ROMPs). I will ask the Minister this, and I expect an answer from him. I thought that he was genuinely concerned about the environment until a recent decision of his — I will not name it.

ROMPs was meant to bring those old, outstanding planning permissions for mineral extraction under control. Why have we not been allowed to see the list of ROMPs? Why has it not been

published and why can the residents not find out the status of the Parkgate quarry, as far as the review of mineral consents is concerned? I am very deeply suspicious that it has not been made available to the public because it would help the debate quite considerably, not only for Parkgate quarry but for the many other quarries in Northern Ireland that we are trying to defend from unsympathetic development. I do not care about negative conditions. Once you give permission for this, the horse has well and truly bolted and nothing that the Department can do can protect the wildlife interest of this site.

Mr Attwood (The Minister of the Environment):

I thank all those Members who contributed to the debate. One truth is self-evident: if you are in public life, you will always be spotted, even up on Connor Road. Politicians of all creeds and views beware.

Mr McLaughlin referred to the fact that planning applications have a tendency to be subject to legal challenge and judicial review. Without commenting in much detail on this particular application, there is good evidence to confirm that that is the case. Our courts have been helpful to those who challenge planning decisions and there are people, not involved in this application, who have demonstrated that they have the capacity, the means and the ambition to challenge legal decisions.

Therefore, in responding to the debate, I will exercise the precautionary principle. Though I will try to deal with the broad issues that have been raised during the debate, I have to adopt the precautionary principle in replying to some of the detail because this is a live application. It is a matter of some controversy, as Members have indicated, and it is in the nature of these sorts of application that controversy arises. The matter has gone before Antrim Borough Council on two occasions with a recommendation to approve. It has been withdrawn from the schedule at a late stage. There are many and varied issues under past and current consideration. For all those reasons, I have to be very vigilant, particularly given my particular competence in respect of the Planning Service, and adopt the precautionary principle. Therefore, there will be issues to which I do not respond in any great detail during this debate. That does not mean that I am disregarding any of the issues raised by Members, it is just that I am being judicious in handling all the matters.

That said, I will ensure that a copy of the debate is forwarded to my colleague Minister Ford; to Anne Garvey, who is the head of planning; and to the divisional planning office, so that each and every matter that has been raised can be —

Mr McGlone: Do you mean Minister Kennedy?

Mr Attwood: Who did I say?

Mr McGlone: Minister Ford.

Mr Attwood: Sorry, I meant Minister Kennedy. I apologise.

5.45 pm

Mr Attwood: So, I will ensure that a copy of the Hansard report is forwarded to all relevant Ministers and officials to ensure that each and all issues raised can be interrogated.

We in government need to create certainty and avoid doubt. That is a legal maxim, but it is one that applies to the conduct of government and the character of good government. Whether in the planning system that means a favourable or less than favourable outcome, there should be certainty and avoidance of doubt where there has been good evidence and good process. In respect of this application, the time is approaching when we need to create certainty and avoid doubt, given that it has been in the planning system since October 2005. That is only fair and reasonable for the applicant and the objectors and for the standards of good government.

Although there are clearly matters that need to be somewhat further interrogated, it is time for this matter to be determined in whatever way it is determined. That is not to prejudge the outcome, even though there is a recommendation to approve. That is, I just think, necessary in order for the credibility and reputation of the planning system to be addressed.

I thank Members for raising this issue. I have been fully briefed on it. As Members know, it is unusual for a current planning application to be discussed in this forum prior to a decision being taken. That does not mean that this is in any way irregular. It reflects the scale of concern that was shared across all Members who spoke in the debate.

As I said, however, I have to be mindful that the Department is engaged in a statutory process that is yet to be concluded. Therefore, I have to

warn myself as to what I can and cannot say. Part of the statutory process involves the legal requirement to consult with the council, which has not yet been done. Therefore, I will restrict some of my comments.

As was said, the proposals date back to 2005 and are for a waste transfer facility for inert construction and demolition waste, and an adjacent landfill facility, again for inert construction and demolition waste, within an existing hard rock quarry on the Connor Road at Parkgate village, County Antrim.

There is a current planning approval, and it is not dead. It is live. There could be activities at the quarry, and I am satisfied that whatever the history of the quarry, whenever quarry work stopped, the legal position — and I am satisfied that it is the legal position — is that there is a current approval in respect of that matter.

Mr Girvan: Minister, did you ever meet any of the objectors in relation to that application? I know there was a meeting with the applicant. Was the same afforded to the objectors?

Mr Attwood: Absolutely. As Mr Ford and Mr Kinahan will confirm, there were two meetings, on separate occasions, with delegations led on one occasion by Mr Kinahan and on another by Mr Ford, when I met residents. So, absolutely, I have been mindful about the issues of residents in the neighbourhood, and Mr Kinahan and Mr Ford can testify to that. Indeed, Mr Ford indicated in his comments that, on more than one occasion, I have used the good authority of my office to involve myself in this matter, and I think that that is on public record.

I have made my position clear on planning applications for waste disposal. Waste of all sorts is a feature of our society and must be dealt with safely and properly in a way that deals with the needs of relevant stakeholders while protecting the environment and the everyday lives of people who live in the locality of waste disposal facilities.

As with a proposal of this nature, as I indicated, the planning applications have been locally controversial and generated strong local objection on the grounds of road safety, noise, odour, water quality and flooding, impacts on air quality, pest control and the impact on the character of the local area. Although I have not interrogated this case in that detail and, therefore, am not commenting on this matter in particular, given

the standards that will be expected around the community planning functions of local councils, and given the direction of travel that is very live at the moment with community involvement in the pre-application process, I would like to think that there would be appropriate consultations by applicants with local communities in a matter of this scale and significance. That is part of the new culture of planning that will be included in the new planning law. That should be the basis on which any current planning application is dealt with.

In response to Mr Girvan's question, the applications were accompanied by an environmental impact statement, as is normal with such proposals. The Department consulted widely, including the NIEA — Northern Ireland Environment Agency — and Antrim Borough Council's environmental health department, which has not raised any objections about noise or any associated matters and is content that the current regulatory process is sufficient for approval. We consulted the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's Rivers Agency, which has not raised any particular issues. Members spoke about water on farmland — I acknowledge that matter — but did not refer to the flooding of Parkgate village, and the Rivers Agency had no issues about that flooding issue either. We also consulted NI Water, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment's Geological Survey of Northern Ireland and the Department for Regional Development's Roads Service.

Based on the assessment of all the relevant factors — the nature and location of the proposals; the development plan; environmental information and mitigation; measures in the environmental impact statement; public objection; and all the narratives that have been outlined by Members — the Department has reached the position whereby it was considered that a recommendation to approve could be presented at Antrim Borough Council, and it would then be up to the council to make its comments. However, given the queries raised by Mr Kinahan and Mr Ford — Mr McCrea has also been attentive to the matter — about the process of the applications, including the applicants' ability to meet access requirements agreed with Roads Service that was scoped out by a number of Members, without making an assessment of those queries, on a prime facie basis, I considered that it was appropriate that this should be withdrawn from the schedule.

Those matters have now been raised in a more substantial and material way and are being interrogated by the planning system.

I will be very quick, Mr Deputy Speaker. That is why the applications were removed from the last council schedule, and the issues raised are being considered as part of the ongoing determination of the applications. I, therefore, can say no more until my officials have fully considered the matters and revisited their original conclusion that the applications could be approved. Further letters of objection, including those mentioned by Mr Kinahan and Mr Ford, need to be responded to, and I have asked that that be done expeditiously, bearing in mind the fact that the applications are seven years old. A recommendation on both applications will be made to Antrim Borough Council in due course, in line with the statutory requirements set out in the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 1991. The council will then have an opportunity to make its position known.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Attwood: Yes.

Mr Wells: I can understand the Minister's invidious position. However, he has not answered the question of the secrecy on the issue of ROMPs nor why he was unforthcoming with that vital information, which would help those in favour and those against the application.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, we have to finish by 5.55 pm.

Mr Attwood: By 5.55 pm, so I have 30 seconds.

I will make two comments in conclusion. I will circulate the Hansard report, and given the concerns that have been expressed, will have an answer prepared for all matters that have been raised as part of the ongoing planning consideration.

In reply to Mr Wells: there is no secrecy. Obligations fall on the Governments in Britain and on us for assessments of ongoing quarry operations. For economic reasons, those assessments have not been undertaken. The policy and the legal situation is that independent of the ROMPs assessment, applications still need to be considered and assessed. A process has to be undertaken for ongoing quarrying operations and assessments, which is without prejudice to any further application that might arise for a quarry. That is the legal situation and is not a

matter of secrecy. It is a matter of the law on the one hand and ongoing good practice on the other. In that regard, I will provide further details to the Member.

Adjourned at 5.55 pm.



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