

Official Report (Hansard)

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 12 March 2012

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Suspension of Standing Orders

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): I beg to move

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 12 March 2012.

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question, I remind Members that this motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 12 March 2012.

Mr Speaker: As there are ayes from all sides of the House and no dissenting voices, I am satisfied that cross-community support has been demonstrated. Today's sitting may go beyond 7.00 pm, if required.

Programme for Government

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to five hours for the debate. The First Minister and deputy First Minister will have up to one hour to divide at their discretion between moving and winding on the motion. All other Members who wish to speak will have 10 minutes.

Mr P Robinson (The First Minister): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government 2011-15 agreed by the Executive.

On 17 November 2011, the Northern Ireland Executive launched the draft Programme for Government for consultation. At that time, I said that this blueprint reflected our intention to take responsibility for our future, our intention to modernise and reform and our intention to move forward as one community. I reaffirm those intentions today. Today, we seek the endorsement of the Northern Ireland Assembly for our proposals and for the Programme for Government. It is the responsibility of those elected to office in Northern Ireland to lead, but it is also our responsibility to listen. Having listened to the people of Northern Ireland through the consultation process, we have improved and added focus to the initial document. Today, we are determined to finalise and pass this Programme for Government, but, even more importantly, tomorrow and in the days that follow, we will deliver it.

This is an exceptionally important time in Northern Ireland's history. We have put the conflict of previous decades behind us. Now, we must focus on tackling the everyday problems that each society throughout the world has to face. We have a genuine decision to make: we can either continue to contain and manage our problems, or we can seek to resolve them and, in doing so, decide to take our place on the

world stage. For our part, that decision has already been made, and delivery has begun.

This year will be our time. To demonstrate that, we have a stunning series of events planned that will attract people from every corner of the globe: the opening of the new Titanic visitor centre in Belfast; the opening of the Giant's Causeway visitor centre; the centenary of the Titanic's maiden voyage; the opening of the MAC, Belfast's new arts centre; the Olympic and Paralympic Games 2012 torch relay; the arrival of the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race to Londonderry; the fiftieth Belfast Festival at Queen's; the Irish Open at Royal Portrush; and, to add flavour to the year, we start a decade of significant centenaries reflecting our historic shared differences.

We are not a people given to hype or hyperbole. Our scepticism is a healthy characteristic. However, let me be absolutely clear: these will be events of genuinely international interest built on a globally important heritage — events that will look forward as well as back. This is our opportunity to showcase everything that is good about Northern Ireland and all the potential that lies ahead of us. In particular, the events represent incredibly important opportunities to highlight the talents of our people. We have absolutely no reason to feel inferior when it comes to our capabilities. Northern Ireland people are second to none. The incredible success of our movie stars such as Liam Neeson, Kenneth Branagh, Stephen Rea or Ciarán Hinds reflects the professionalism and hard work of those individuals, as well as the humour, culture and shared heritage of the community that nurtured them.

The question is how we build on the deep reservoir of talent that exists here. The challenge must be to create a society that can bring people together to push in the same direction for the common good. There is no reason why that cannot happen, and the Programme for Government sets out a route map to achieve that.

People from here have already had a large impact across the world. For example, people of local stock helped to build modern America. Look at that long list of US presidents whose lineage is traced back to Northern Ireland. Think about international sports stars such as Graeme McDowell, Rory McIlroy and Darren Clarke, who, today, compete with the best in the world and, time after time, win. For centuries, people

from here have gone elsewhere to make their mark. The challenge before us is to create the opportunities that will encourage our citizens to root themselves right here.

For every superstar, there are many tens of thousands of unsung heroes contributing huge value through business, working in our hospitals or schools or supporting the most vulnerable in their communities. It is those so-called ordinary people who will transform our society. That is why it was so important to listen to the opinions coming from Northern Ireland's grass roots while we finalised our Programme for Government. Following the November launch, we undertook an extensive programme of engagement with the public and key stakeholders. During that period, we issued around 1,000 documents, received more than 430 responses and held or supported 20 events. We took heed of what we heard, and we are confident that the finalised Programme for Government presents a real and viable business plan to move us forward, grow our economy and achieve the social changes that are necessary to ensure that our community — a single, unified community — moves from strength to strength. For example, the final version of the programme draws out the top priorities identified during the consultation, namely the promotion of over 25,000 new jobs; £1 billion of investment in the Northern Ireland economy; increased visitor numbers and tourist revenue; supporting young people into employment by providing skills and training; and reforming and modernising the delivery of health and social care.

Before I talk about the outcome of the consultation in more detail, I would like colleagues to take a step back for a moment and think about what this programme means for our people. In simple terms, people want delivery. They want delivery on the ground that they can see, feel and understand; they want good jobs; they want to live in safe, peaceful and clean communities; and they want to know that they will receive effective services when they need them. Put simply, people in Northern Ireland want exactly the same things as everyone the world over hopes for — a good quality of life for themselves, their family and their community. The Programme for Government is, therefore, vital. It is a statement of genuine intent that sets out a road map for reform that will lead us to the future that our citizens desire and deserve.

The draft programme had a strong emphasis on the economy, and we will return to that theme tomorrow, when we hold our debate on the economic strategy. As it stands, the final version of the Programme for Government retains a similar emphasis, and I make no apology for that. People need to have the chance to contribute through work. We need opportunities that can motivate everyone and enable them to create the value that they, their families and their communities need. It is good for their health and well-being, good for their community and good for the economy as a whole.

A commitment to promote 25,000 new jobs, therefore, remains at the top of the agenda, along with commitments to support young people into employment by providing skills and training; to support £300 million of investment by businesses in R&D, with at least 20% coming from small and medium-sized enterprises; to press for the devolution of corporation tax and reduce its level; to include social clauses in all our public procurement contracts for supplies, services and construction; to aid the liquidity of small and medium-sized enterprises through a £50 million loan fund; to deliver at least 30 schemes to improve landscapes and public areas and promote private sector investment in towns and cities; to ensure that 90% of large-scale investment planning decisions are made within six months and applications with job creation potential are given additional weight; to introduce an extension of the small business rate relief scheme to 2015; and to eliminate air passenger duty on direct long-haul flights. However, we have gone further. The final Programme for Government includes enhanced commitments on the economy, including commitments to achieve a £375 million injection through foreign direct investment, which is an increase from £300 million in the draft programme, as part of a £1 billion investment package, and to facilitate the delivery of the Executive's 20% target for increased drawdown of competitive EU funds. That is a new commitment. The final Programme for Government also includes commitments to increase the value of manufacturing exports by 20%, which is an increase from the 15% commitment in the draft programme; to raise visitor numbers to 4.2 million, which is an increase from 3.6 million in the draft programme; and to increase tourist revenue to £676 million by 2013, which is an increase from the £625 million committed in the draft programme.

The message is that we have listened to what we have been told. It is clear that a strong economy is needed to drive social change. People need to be empowered to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. Delivery will also require investment. We will return to that in more detail in coming weeks in the debate on the investment strategy, which was the third document we launched for public consultation back in November. All of this will require a huge, concerted effort by everyone. Our economy will grow only by developing people and empowering them to deliver the necessary growth. We need to foster business entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs and capable employees who can work with international companies. However, creating that level of opportunity will be difficult when 28% of children are in a low-income household. Economic measures will not be able to deliver all the change that is needed. Thriving economies help to create healthy communities, but healthy and peaceful communities are also a very important precursor to a strong economy.

12.15 pm

We are determined to work together across government to make a real impact on the divisions that have blighted our community. That is why we have developed the Delivering Social Change delivery framework. The reality is that we cannot continue to address the so-called intractable problems of poverty and social inclusion using the methods employed in the past. We have too many strategies, too many policies and too many action plans, many of which refer to work already proposed or under way and do not add real value. The difference with this new approach is that we are not interested in producing vast and unwieldy documents for their own sake. We want to pursue a smaller number of additional objectives; for example, flagship projects to support early interventions where children are at risk of harm. The key will be to introduce a systematic roll-out of programmes that can make a difference across all areas. The development of Delivering Social Change demonstrates the value of listening. People told us that they expect to see Departments working together effectively and transparently to make a difference.

We paid attention to concerns that the needs of key groups, such as victims and survivors, were not fully reflected in the draft. We decided that a new approach would be required that would enable us to focus the £80 million social

investment fund, the £12 million childcare fund and the other available resources on the actions that can impact most effectively in the long term. We will look carefully at what that means for existing commitments to produce action plans. In future, our primary focus will be on actions, not plans.

This systematic, outcome-focused approach will also apply to the other pledges in the Programme for Government. Although we need to focus on the economy, the Programme for Government is full of commitments that are essential if we are to achieve the necessary transformation in quality of life for our citizens. Important examples include promises to introduce and support initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty across Northern Ireland, including preventative interventions, improved thermal efficiency of Housing Executive stock and ensuring full double glazing in its properties. Other examples include the establishment of an advisory group to assist Ministers in alleviating hardship, including any implications arising from the UK Government's welfare reform programme, and the development of the One Plan for the regeneration of Londonderry, incorporating the key sites at Fort George and Ebrington. I am particularly pleased to see a new pledge to improve patient and client outcomes and access to new treatments and services and the expansion of the existing commitment on educational achievement at GCSE to include improvements not only for young people from a disadvantaged background but for the wider population, given the need to restore our international position and address underachievement.

I have already made my views clear about the desirability of bringing our community together through education. I am particularly pleased to say that three critical commitments remain in the finalised programme: first, to establish a ministerial advisory group that will explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education for the advancement of shared education; secondly, to ensure that all children have the opportunity to participate in shared education programmes by 2015; and, thirdly, to increase substantially the number of schools that share facilities by that same year. These are real commitments, and, together with a new pledge to actively seek local agreement to reduce the number of peace walls, alongside the development of our CSI strategy, I fully expect to see this society coming together in new ways

to deliver the shared future that we all want. I believe that this demonstrates fully that the Executive have listened to their consultees and that the Programme for Government has been improved as a result.

We recognise that the draft programme is significantly shorter than its predecessor, containing as it does 76 commitments, compared to almost 400 previously. Some of those consulted felt that 76 commitments were still too many, while others highlighted the desire to address key gaps, including the aspiration to place greater emphasis on the needs of children, older people and those with disabilities.

What has come across very strongly from this exercise is that, although people are generally supportive of the programme, they are much more focused on delivery. They want us to listen, but they want to see results. They want tangible transformation, not endless analysis. In that context, I thank the Committee for its work on the programme. I am very grateful to it and the Chairman for the work that underpins the Committee's conclusions. We will seek to fill all the gaps that were identified through that engagement, either through the amendments to the programme that we have already made or as we move forward with implementation.

I am also happy to confirm that we will put in place arrangements to ensure that rigorous delivery plans are in place to meet our commitments. Those will be the subject of progress reports, which will be published annually, together with mid-year performance updates. The last time I addressed the Assembly on the draft Programme for Government, I said that we were on a new journey in a new era of devolved government. For the first time in a generation, we have completed a full Assembly term and have begun the job of building a better future. By the time of the next Assembly election, we will be judged by the electorate on our delivery. I believe that, through this Programme for Government, we can and will deliver a better, brighter and more prosperous Northern Ireland. I am determined that that delivery should be visible straight away. Indeed, we have been delivering impressively and at a significantly greater pace, especially since the Assembly election. This debate is a vital step in the process. Members will be aware of the issues that our citizens experience on the ground. They see and feel at first hand the impact of the economic downturn and the tightening

of public resources. Members will, no doubt, have views about the commitments that are set out, and many may not always agree on those priorities. Therefore, it is important that Members use this opportunity to inform the process. However, when the debate concludes, let us be in no doubt that this programme must be implemented.

I look forward to seeing the Executive's commitments delivered, and I look forward to working with all Assembly Members who want Northern Ireland to move forward to make that happen. I commend the motion, and I commend the Programme for Government to the House.

Mr Elliott (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for bringing this forward and for briefing me this morning on the aspects of the Programme for Government. I speak on behalf of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Members will be aware that the Committee took the lead in co-ordinating the responses of Statutory Committees to the Programme for Government and sought their views on it, with particular focus on three specific areas: gaps in the Programme for Government; comments on the milestones and outcomes of the departmental commitments; and monitoring progress. I am sure that the Chairpersons and members of other Committees will give their views.

The Committee was briefed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on the draft Programme for Government on 14 December last year. The Committee also held round-table discussions to seek the views of the commissions that fall within OFMDFM's remit: the Equality Commission; the Commissioner for Children and Young People; the Commissioner for Older People; and the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors.

Members will be aware that the Committee has not had an opportunity to consider or comment on the final version of the Programme for Government that we are debating today or the changes from the draft. However, the Committee welcomed the five strategic priorities in the draft Programme for Government, which are now in the final version.

I shall begin by considering gaps in the Programme for Government, some of which have been addressed. The Committee for the Office of

the First Minister and deputy First Minister wanted to see greater reference to Europe in the Programme for Government, and the addition of the Executive's European priorities in the final Programme for Government's building blocks for priorities 1, 2 and 3 is welcome. The Committee also welcomes the inclusion in priority 1 of the final Programme for Government of an additional specific commitment on the Executive's 20% target for increased drawdown of competitive European Union funding that it had asked OFMDFM to consider.

The Committee commented on the cross-cutting nature of the priorities and wished to see more detail on how Departments' progress will be monitored to allow for effective scrutiny, particularly in areas such as poverty and social exclusion, and the integrated childcare strategy. I note that the final Programme for Government includes more detail in priority 2 about structures to co-ordinate Departments working together to tackle poverty and social exclusion, namely the Delivering Social Change framework. The Committee considered correspondence about the DSC framework from the First Minister and deputy First Minister at its meeting last week and agreed to request an oral briefing on it. We look forward to learning more about how it will deliver effective, cross-departmental working.

The Committee asked that consideration be given to including Northern Ireland-specific targets in the Programme for Government in addition to the UK-wide targets in the Child Poverty Act 2010. That would allow for monitoring of progress on child poverty locally and contribute towards achieving the UK-wide targets. We do not feel that has been significantly addressed in the Programme for Government document because we believe that the UK targets could be met without any improvement in the Northern Ireland targets. That is why it is important that we see localised Northern Ireland targets.

The Committee's report also highlighted the need for detailed delivery plans. The Committee was briefed by officials on the 2008-2011 Programme for Government delivery report at its meeting last week. We learned that Committees will have an opportunity to comment on the draft delivery plans of their respective Departments, and OFMDFM plans to bring that forward to monitor progress and delivery of the Programme for Government.

The Commission for Victims and Survivors felt that there was insufficient reference to dealing with the past, a problem that has continued to plague society in Northern Ireland and, it appears, will continue to do so. The commissioners also felt that a commitment in the Programme for Government to continue to develop services that address the needs of victims and their families would have afforded recognition to victims.

The Commissioner for Older People felt that the draft PFG did not sufficiently address the significance of an ageing population, including its significance for Northern Ireland's workforce and as a key consumer of health and social services. The commissioner also felt that increasing pensioner poverty, including fuel poverty, should have been referenced in the Programme for Government.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People believed that there were significant gaps in the draft Programme for Government in a number of areas, including early intervention, family support, mental health, play and leisure participation, safeguarding children, post-primary transfer, special educational needs, children in care and children with disabilities.

The commissioners gave a broad welcome to the proposal to legislate to extend age discrimination to the provision of goods and services. The Equality Commission and a number of Committee members highlighted the need for legislation on race and disability to be brought up to date with developments in the rest of the United Kingdom. The Committee asked OFMDFM to consider bringing forward a flexible framework capable of reflecting change and best practice in relation to disability and race. I am sure that the Committee will wish to return to that issue when we have more detail on the measures to promote the rights of people from an ethnic minority background, which has been inserted in priority 2 of the final Programme for Government.

On legislation generally, I note that the concluding sentence of annex 1 of the PFG now states:

"It is intended that this Programme for Government will be supported by a legislative programme that complements its delivery objectives."

The Committee's report stated that it would like to see a commitment to the publication of a rolling legislative programme and more

information on legislation that has been agreed. This is an issue that the Committee will return to, and I raised it with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister just this morning. I understand that they may have some suggestions on how to improve that.

The Committee heard evidence relating to unclaimed benefits, particularly for older people, and it would welcome a mechanism whereby an individual's inquiry about a particular benefit entitlement would be the trigger for the provision of advice and a check on his or her other benefit entitlements.

The Committee wishes to see the issue of peace walls considered in consultation with the affected local communities from the outset. No doubt, the Chairperson of the Justice Committee will want to comment further on what is in the final version of the PFG.

The Committee has reservations about the red/amber/green system of recording progress. The Committee for Finance and Personnel provided us with a PEDU briefing on the monitoring arrangements for PFG at our meeting on 7 March, and we will consider that again this week.

The Committee is keen that the system of monitoring departmental progress reflects what is happening on the ground, with regular reporting to Committees.

12.30 pm

I will now reference some issues that the Ulster Unionist Party and I, as a member, have. We have been informed this afternoon that there were 430 written responses to the PFG, and I assume that civil servants and, indeed, Ministers have been working overtime in the past couple of weeks to bring forward the final PFG. My party and I welcome that, because for the past 12 months, we have been calling for a Programme for Government to be introduced. We also welcome the fact that it has been brought forward at this level.

In respect of corporation tax, I understand that the joint ministerial working group had its second meeting on 7 March. Given that the PFG sets out that an Executive announcement on the rate of corporation tax for Northern Ireland will be made in 2014-15, I am keen to know what progress has been made in identifying the cost to the block grant, as that is the first step in the process.

As regards the development of the Maze/Long Kesh as a regeneration site of regional significance, the Ulster Unionist Party wants the site to be taken forward in a practical manner through, for example, the relocation of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society and the Ulster Aviation Society. However, we do not support the allocation of substantial European funding to a conflict resolution centre, which is offensive to many victims. I note that, on page 33 of the PFG, there is a reference to private sector development at the Maze/Long Kesh site. I am keen to get some more information on that from the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

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

Mr Elliott: I also note on page 34 that the references to Ilex are missing even though references to Fort George and Ebrington are still included in the final Programme for Government.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Elliott: I am also keen to get some information on that.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): As Chair of the Education Committee, I am pleased to be able to contribute to the debate on the Programme for Government. My comments are intended to be an overview of the issues that were raised with us during our consideration of the PFG. The Committee for Education welcomed the opportunity last year to respond to the consultation on the draft Programme for Government. The Committee gave the programme due time and consideration and wrote to stakeholders inviting them to comment and encouraging them to respond to the main consultation by OFMDFM. The Committee is disappointed that despite the consultation exercise, there have been minimal changes on education to the final Programme for Government and feels that the stakeholders could have been listened to in a more appropriate manner. Although the Committee welcomes the PFG in principle, it has some reservations about the Department of Education's ability to deliver on it.

The Committee notes that the only milestone that references secure funding relates to the Lisanelly complex in Omagh. The Committee believes that other programme initiatives should have a similar commitment if the PFG is to be successfully delivered. There is often a sense that Departments fail to carry through agreed

policies with a sense of urgency. The Committee believes that the Executive should be required to produce a 10-year strategy for children and young people, rather than piecemeal policies that are introduced and scrapped in a short time.

The Committee recommended that the Programme for Government should include an objective to get the supply and demand of teachers into reasonable equilibrium by 2020, coupled with the strategic teacher workforce development plan. Given the many concerns out there, especially among teaching staff, that issue needs to be addressed urgently.

The Committee has also been made aware of concerns around schools being expected to deliver savings in an already constrained economic climate. Budget reductions are leading to sustained pressure on class sizes, redundancies and school projects that require financing. Given those concerns, particularly about financial structures, we have serious worries about pupil:teacher ratios and how they will impact on attaining and achieving certain other elements of the Programme for Government, which I will deal with in a moment.

The Committee recognises the fact that the Executive face financial constraints and challenges. Consequently, all Departments must make best use of their allocated resources. It is vital that the education of children and young people does not suffer. We need to ensure that we do all that we can to protect the valuable service that schools continue to provide in Northern Ireland.

In general, the Committee is disappointed that there is no requirement on Departments to collaborate on or achieve outcomes that are relevant to two or more Departments. That should be expected as an efficiency measure. The Committee calls on the Executive to take a more thoroughly co-ordinated and consistent approach to cross-departmental policy development. The Committee would also like a requirement on all Departments to publish an implementation plan that is linked to the PFG. In that regard, I welcome comments that were made earlier by the First Minister in his opening statement, when he mentioned plans to produce a delivery plan. The expansion of that would ensure that there is a delivery plan by which we could judge how Departments, particularly the Department of Education — I speak as Chair of the Committee for Education — deliver against the Programme for Government's objectives.

The Committee believes that the Department of Education should plan children's education from nursery through to further education. In that vein, literacy and numeracy should be dealt with as a continuum from early years to the adult learner. The current split between the literacy and numeracy strategy, which has been developed in the Department of Education, and the essential skills strategy in the Department for Employment and Learning is unhelpful and, indeed, has created considerable challenges.

Going a step further is a joint 14-to-19 years policy, agreed with the Department for Employment and Learning, to ensure that, at the interface between formal education, further and higher education and employment, there is a focus on the economically necessary skills, subjects and courses that will contribute to rebalancing and rebuilding the Northern Ireland economy. In that regard, I particularly welcome the Programme for Government's commitment to increase uptake in places on economically relevant courses in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. That will make an invaluable contribution to ensuring that relevant skills are available to young people in order for them to contribute to the economic well-being and prosperity of Northern Ireland.

Although the Committee welcomes the commitment to ensure that at least one year of preschool education is available to every family who wants it, it is disappointed that the Department of Education did not go the extra mile — no pun intended — to include a commitment that those places will be within a reasonable and manageable distance of the family home. Of course, Members will remember that, not many months ago, we all faced situations in our constituencies in which places were offered some 50 or 60 miles away. That is not the best way to provide a local service for local communities.

The Committee welcomes the Department's commitment to improve overall achievement in GCSEs, particularly its focus on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, it would have liked a commitment to improve the achievement of multiple underachieving groups, rather than just that targeted group, as all young people deserve an equal opportunity to gain a high-quality education in Northern Ireland.

The Committee accepts that the schools estate in Northern Ireland requires auditing and rationalisation and is well aware of work that the

Department is undertaking on viability audits and its commitment to shared education, which includes increasing the number of schools that share facilities by 2015. However, it would have preferred the inclusion of a commitment on the community use of schools, which has been mentioned in most significant audits of the Department from time to time, alongside commitments that are already given in the PFG.

The Committee urges the Department and the Executive to carefully manage the information that is released to school leaders and the general public in order to minimise the risk of scaremongering because schools may be labelled as failing in a report, yet provide a quality service to our young people.

The Committee recognises that the commitment to create the Education and Skills Authority promises a structural change that aims to make a contribution to the delivery of high-quality and efficient services. I note that the Department is committed to establishing ESA by 2014-15, and that that pledge is contained under priority 5 of the PFG. However, I want to make it clear that the Committee will not be rushed into pushing the Bill that will create ESA through the House. It intends to take every opportunity to discuss that important legislation and to give it the priority and consideration that it deserves.

The Committee believes that there is little point having commitments and milestones unless there is a robust monitoring process to ensure their implementation. The commitments outlined should be captured through measurable performance indicators, and the Committee has suggested that quantifiable indicators should become the composite basis for monitoring progress on the delivery of the PFG. For instance, there is no indication — it is a matter of serious concern — of how the Department of Education and its body the Education and Training Inspectorate will measure whether literacy and numeracy levels have improved or whether additional resources have been successfully targeted. I ask respectfully that that issue is taken seriously. If we are to attain the objectives for literacy and numeracy, we have to ensure that we can adequately measure the outcomes. It is a critical issue in education. The Committee suggests that the Department should develop a detailed road map —

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

Mr Storey: — with specific timelines that indicate how each stated milestone will be achieved. As

Chair of the Education Committee, I commend these comments to the House.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Chéad-Aire fosta. I thank the Minister for his opening statement and welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. The Committee for Finance and Personnel gave its response to the draft Programme for Government through the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister in February.

From a finance and personnel perspective, the main focus of the Programme for Government is on growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future. The specific issues within those that I wish to concentrate on are the devolution of corporation tax, air passenger duty for direct long-haul flights, the extension of the small business rate relief scheme and the large retail levy, and the use of social clauses in public procurement contracts.

The devolution of corporation tax is a key commitment in the Programme for Government, which will go towards rebalancing the economy. It has the support, I believe, of all the parties in the House and the British Secretary of State, yet, at times, progress on that issue has been frustratingly slow. The Chair of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister referred to the meeting of the joint ministerial working group on 7 March, and the report of that group will be of interest to a number of Committees. It is desirable that we have some clarity and focus on what the cost to the block grant will be, how that will be calculated with the Treasury and what agreements have been reached. We have heard wildly varying figures over the past number of months, and we want some clear sense of what formula will be used to agree the cost to the block grant of devolving that power. We also need a clear analysis on its affordability and the fair arrangements for the implementation of corporation tax powers once they are devolved to the Assembly, and some focus on the administrative changes and legislation that will be required. I realise that it is a fairly detailed area of work. However, there has been some concern not only in the Assembly but in the broader community and the business community that things have moved slower than was anticipated.

Members will be very much aware that investment decisions are taken on the basis of confidence, and I think that in progressing the discussions on corporation tax, we have to be mindful of instilling some confidence that there is momentum in the process and that it is leading us towards a satisfactory resolution of the issues.

12.45 pm

The removal of air passenger duty on direct long-haul flights has been supported across the Chamber. The devolution of those powers will be in a Westminster Finance Bill in 2012. The Finance Committee will have a scrutiny function in the legislative consent motion that will implement that change here, and, obviously, the motion will be debated in the Assembly. Although it is a much smaller, but vital, issue for investment and direct linkages, particularly to North America, its importance is that, in some ways, it will set a template for the Assembly's handling of the corporation tax issue. There are useful lessons that can be road-tested when the air passenger duty legislative consent motion comes before the Committee and the House.

The small business rate relief scheme, to which the First Minister referred, and its consequence for the large retail levy, is another area of DFP interest in the Programme for Government. There is a very strong understanding across all parties and all Members of the difficulties that small local businesses, town centre businesses and small rural businesses are facing, and we are all seeing the increase in the numbers of boarded-up shops on high streets and in villages across the Six Counties. There was a strong desire among all parties and all Members to try to find some measure to assist the sustainability of small local businesses, and, in that sense, the Department of Finance's approach was to increase the large retail levy and to use that money to offset and assist the extension of the small business rate relief scheme. There was a clear recognition that that was a fairly blunt instrument with which to deal with the situation, but nonetheless, the matter was well debated here, and the Committee for Finance and Personnel carried out a substantial amount of work on the issue through its engagement with stakeholders.

Although the legislation was brought to the House under accelerated passage, the debate on it was substantial. There are clear commitments, from DFP's perspective, that need to be adhered

to for the 2015 non-domestic rates revaluation and for reviews on the effectiveness of the small business rate relief scheme, and we will work with the Department to ensure that that happens. Hopefully, it will bring the commitment in the Programme for Government into a more regulated form of assisting small businesses and of rates overall, which can direct interventions where the Executive feel they are necessary to sustain the local economy.

The First Minister also referred specifically to the use of social clauses in procurement contracts. That, again, has strong support across all parties in the Assembly, and there is a strong sense that our public spending gives us the ability to effect positive social and economic outcomes and positive local outcomes. The assurances in the Programme for Government on that are very welcome, as is the practice across some Departments, but there is a concern in the Committee and beyond that some Departments seem to believe that references to equality or health and safety measures can somehow cover their commitment to use social clauses in contracts. Social clauses should become the norm in contracts.

There is a clear expectation across the Chamber that what we have considered to be social clauses are those that deal with issues such as apprenticeships, the long-term unemployed and environmental outcomes. There is work to be done by the Central Procurement Directorate and the Executive to give us a clear definition of what we consider to be social clauses. That will ensure that no Departments escape the proper development of social clauses by referring to equality or health and safety issues and by including them as a box-ticking exercise to show that social clauses have been in a contract. The commitment to that is welcome, but I think that there is a need for clarity and consistency across Departments to ensure that we have the proper outcomes and that what we collectively consider to be the proper usage of social clauses to achieve positive local, social and economic outcomes is being delivered consistently across all Departments.

Those are just some of the issues that are of a DFP interest. I welcome the tabling of the motion, and I look forward to the rest of the debate. I encourage support for the Programme for Government.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to speak on behalf of the SDLP in recognising the Programme for Government, which has been somewhat long awaited. I have to draw a contrast between the very short turnaround period from the closure of consultee reports with the eight months to one year that was required to look at that which followed the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy. Let us hope that the short time period does not reflect a lack of commitment by the Executive to listen to what the stakeholders had to say about the Programme for Government. After all, it is a three-year Programme for Government at a time of severe hardship when many people are crying out for help. It is a time when people are hoping that devolution will make a difference to their lives.

The document contains a number of good points. Some of the positive elements include challenging targets in tourism, and I note with interest how the First Minister lauded, quite properly, our sporting and movie stars who have achieved world-class status, prizes and recognition. I contrast that with the slashing of the DCAL budget, and I wonder whether that is the best way in which we should be nurturing in our young people ambitious targets for hero worship. They want to follow their stars but lack the financial assistance to reach that acclaim and those targets.

The Programme for Government also includes a financial capability strategy, and we are happy that that has been taken on board. In our party's contribution in response to the draft PFG, we had asked for that. Social clauses are also included, and a lot of work is to be done around procurement and in educating some of our smaller firms and businesses in how to secure tenders for government work in particular. The inclusion of the social clauses will provide an opportunity to assist the needs of our long-term unemployed, and I look forward to the working out of those.

As the First Minister referred to, in comparison to the draft Programme for Government, there are more specific targets and measures on combating fuel poverty. The extension of the social protection fund is very much welcomed, although I am not sure which pot of money that has come from because, initially, there was only £20 million for that in the first year. We will wait to hear from the First Minister or others about where that money is coming from.

There are too many other concerns. The document contains no legislative programme to ensure implementation and delivery. It is unclear where it links with the finance programme. It is too vague on key commitments, detail and measurable targets, and those comments have been made not only by the SDLP but by many stakeholders, including in response to the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's lack of commitment to the eradication of TB and on the comments that the Chair of the Education Committee outlined on the pressures facing the education sector following CCMS and the viability —

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Member for giving way. Will she give consideration in her speech to how the Programme for Government could provide, or whether it provides, solutions to counter the impact of welfare reform proposals, the projected increases in fuel duties in next week's UK Budget, the rising cost of energy prices, the general economic recession and, shall we say, the unintended consequences for communities and individuals?

Mrs D Kelly: The Member makes a number of good points about welfare reform and the impact that it will have. I will come to that in due course.

The target to create 25,000 jobs is but a drop in the ocean given that the unemployment rate is over 60,000. Some commentators suggested in the media over the weekend that Northern Ireland remains the worst for rising jobless totals, the number of home repossessions and the fact that there is no security blanket for those who are at risk of losing their home, unlike in parts of GB where there is some mortgage relief.

Many people who have probably worked all their life and have now become unemployed will, for the first time, be recipients of welfare reform, never mind those who have had to depend on it for many years. The SDLP, as a party, is very concerned about the lack of vision to deal with the proposed welfare reforms and the economic recession that we are still in. In fact, as I understand it, the North is the only part of Northern Ireland and GB that is still in a recession. *[Interruption.]* No, I am quite sure what I need; I do not need any help from across the way.

The coalition Government's welfare cuts and major aspects of their welfare reform agenda are having, and will continue to have, a significant detrimental impact on our community. Worryingly,

given the potential impact of welfare reform, the document contains only one substantive reference to it. As part of a wider, laudable but immeasurable commitment to alleviate hardship comes a commitment to establish an advisory group to assist Ministers. That is the only proposal that the draft Programme for Government has for that area. The SDLP believes that given the grave nature of the welfare reform proposals for Northern Ireland, especially when taking into account our historically high levels of disadvantage, the Executive must ensure that they make opposition to the damaging aspects of welfare reform the highest priority and pursue all possible legal and operational flexibilities and financial support to mitigate the impact of welfare cuts and changes imposed on Northern Ireland. To assist people to cope with the change to universal credit and to deal with debt, the Programme for Government should include the development of a financial capability strategy. Northern Ireland is the only region undergoing welfare reform, and I welcome the fact that the strategy will be in place. I hope that we see an action plan in the medium term.

A number of Members have commented on childcare and child poverty. There is nothing in the draft Programme for Government to give one confidence that the Executive will deliver on promises that they made in the previous Programme for Government, bearing in mind that only 40% of the targets in the previous Programme for Government were met. Perhaps that really underscores why there are fewer measurable commitments in this Programme for Government. You really do not want to stand up many of the Departments to proper scrutiny.

As we know, there are also huge changes to the public sector through the threatened closure of many of our schools and colleges and the closure and termination of many of our services in the health and social care sector. That is a major concern. The Executive have, for a long time, been kicking many of the tough decisions down the road, but this Programme for Government is not ambitious and does not reflect the concerns that many people have. This Programme for Government has not given much commitment to the rebalancing of the Northern Ireland economy, other than the talk about corporation tax. There is a lack of other ambitions on tax-varying powers and, indeed, no ambition about how to raise some of the funds that are required.

Ms Ritchie: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: Only because it is you.

Ms Ritchie: I thank the Member for giving way. Would the Member consider it helpful if, in their winding-up speech, the First Minister and deputy First Minister could provide us with an update from the ministerial working group on rebalancing the economy, which, I understand, met last week, and an update from the joint consultative committee, which will have dealt with the disputatious nature of the £18 billion that was supposed to be part of the capital dividend for devolution and would very much have contributed to our local economy and pump-primed the construction industry?

1.00 pm

Mrs D Kelly: Given the time, yes. I also note the absence of any ambitious targets around North/South co-operation and the failure yet again to produce a —

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

Mrs D Kelly: — time frame for a single equality Bill.

Mr Lyttle: I support the motion and welcome the publication of the Programme for Government. It is vital for any Government to listen to the concerns of people and to clearly communicate a vision, priorities and commitments to provide direction and hope to a community. I believe that the Programme for Government will provide a platform for the talent, enterprise and endeavour of our people to drive social and economic change in Northern Ireland.

Admittedly, our system of mandatory coalition government is unique and not always conducive to joined-up delivery, so I welcome the cross-cutting nature of each of the five main priorities in the programme, and I hope that they will encourage more collaborative and cross-departmental delivery. The Alliance Party would go further to ensure joined-up government by placing a statutory duty on Departments to co-operate. We believe that that legislative duty would further promote joined-up working for vital policy delivery in key areas.

We are all Members of a legislative Assembly, so I share concerns about the absence of a legislative programme in the document. The Programme for Government makes frequent reference to strategies but few commitments

to specific legislation. Although strategies and action plans are, of course, central to policy delivery, there are key areas where legislation is essential. The Alliance Party published a legislative programme identifying Bills that the Assembly could bring forward, including a shared housing Bill, a comprehensive languages Bill, a single equality Bill and a single mental health and mental capacity Bill. Other organisations have also identified areas, such as race relations and disability rights, where legislative change is urgently needed to ensure that people in Northern Ireland have the same protection as that served to the rest of these islands.

I do, of course, welcome the priority that the Programme for Government has placed on our economy. It is clear that we must work together to rebalance our economy and deliver long-term, sustainable economic growth and job creation for Northern Ireland. I particularly welcome commitments to increased investment, to prioritising skills delivery, to increasing qualifications and to increasing the uptake of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects. Those commitments are vital if we are to create the relevantly skilled workforce and attract the investment needed in Northern Ireland.

I also welcome specific measures to support economic growth, including the extension of the small business rate relief scheme, support for social enterprise and efforts to maximise the excellent tourism product that we are able to offer on a world stage. It is also important that we offer hope to our young people. We have an Executive strategy for employment, education and training for our young people, and the Minister for Employment is working hard to deliver a specific youth employment intervention programme with the support of the Minister of Finance. We need action on those areas urgently.

Another key aspect of rebuilding our economy and welfare reform is to help people back into work. A significant barrier to employment for many people is the lack of affordable childcare in Northern Ireland. I therefore welcome the commitment to deliver the long-overdue childcare strategy. However, as with other strategies, such as that on child poverty, it is essential that there is no delay in bringing forward action in that area. I also hope and expect that any childcare strategy and action plan will seek to raise awareness of childcare voucher schemes and promote

the uptake of the childcare element of working tax credit, almost £6 million of which, it is estimated, could be going unclaimed each year. Promoting awareness of assistance that is already available but underutilised is a cost-effective way of encouraging parents back into employment.

Thankfully, we in Northern Ireland are living longer. I would like to see older people given greater recognition in the Programme for Government. Poverty and social exclusion among older people are serious issues, and, every week, approximately £2 million in pension credit could be going unclaimed. That is money that could mean the difference between living above or below the poverty line and could benefit the health and well-being of older people but which is lost from our economy.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that it was rather disappointing to hear only last week the Minister for Social Development suggest that another look might be taken at senior citizens and their SmartPasses? In other words, the free travel arrangements could be taken away from some of our senior citizens, which would be to their detriment.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree that we must put the rights and the active ageing of our older people at the centre of all our policy in government. I would also like to see our Government —

Mr P Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Certainly.

Mr P Robinson: I am grateful. Before the scaremongering starts, let us be very clear: the DUP brought in the free fares scheme for our senior citizens, and the DUP will ensure that it remains.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the Member to continue. The Member must be heard.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the First Minister for his reassurances on that.

I also welcome the commitment to implement reforms to our social care system. It is vital that those reforms ensure that social care for our older people is based on rights, entitlements and fairness. Investing in preventative measures

ensures that older people can remain at home rather than be admitted to hospital.

As a member of the Alliance Party, I welcome that the Programme for Government makes building a strong, shared and united community a key and explicit aim. My party has stood for cross-community co-operation and has highlighted the human and economic waste that division causes. We will continue to hold the Government to account for their practical action in pursuit of a better and shared future for all. I believe that the Programme for Government could have explicitly acknowledged that the duplication of services is no longer sustainable or acceptable in a united community.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: Yes. I am trying to get on, but go ahead.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member; I will not take up much of his time. I agree with and have great sympathy for his point about shared services across the community. In the real world, however, will the Member explain how that can be implemented in a divided city such as Belfast?

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. That might be for a whole other debate on another day, but I appreciate that there are logistical challenges with the issue. However, we need to put clear actions in place to do that.

I welcome the long overdue commitment to make the Education and Skills Authority operational by 2013. The target date that the previous Programme for Government set for the establishment of a single Education and Skills Authority was 2009. My party consistently called for the establishment of a single body and campaigned for increased sharing and integration in the education system. I do not believe that it is sustainable or desirable to keep our children segregated in our schools. Therefore, I reiterate my concern that the inclusion of the controlled and maintained sectors is explicit in the proposed Education and Skills Authority, but I have yet to see any clear reciprocal mechanism for the integrated sector. That has not done too much to address doubts about the Executive's ability to deliver not just words but concrete action on a shared future. Unfortunately, the Programme for Government also fails to resolve the unregulated post-primary transfer. I think that most of us

agree that we will continue to fail our children and young people every year until the issue is addressed.

I endorse the Executive's commitment to develop long-term approaches to deal with issues such as fuel poverty. Although the one-off payment that the social protection fund provided was of assistance to many vulnerable people this year, it is essential that more sustainable long-term measures are developed, including investment in double glazing, energy efficiency and environmentally friendly heating and insulation, which has been mentioned.

The Alliance Party's priority commitment remains the delivery of a shared and better future for all in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I welcome the commitment that the programme gives to the delivery of an overarching cross-departmental strategy to build a cohesive, shared and integrated community in Northern Ireland. A devolved Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has yet to deliver on that issue. I sincerely hope that the Executive can be the first to action meaningful and fundamental change in integrated education and mixed housing and that they can deliver shared public space in Northern Ireland for all to enjoy. I also believe that, if we are to build a united community, we must deal with our past, which has a profound impact on our divided present.

I welcome the work to complete more ambitious targets for delivery. They must be measureable and monitored in an open and transparent manner. Although I have expressed some concerns —

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

Mr Lyttle: — about how we would do things differently, I broadly endorse the Programme for Government, and I commit to encouraging an approach and ideas that breed delivery on, and a strategic direction for, the rebuilding of our economy.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I am pleased to speak in the debate as Chairman of the Justice Committee.

The Programme for Government sets out the Executive's key priorities for the next four years, and I welcome the commitments that have been included in relation to improving the justice system for all our citizens. Of great importance to the public is the level of crime, particularly serious crime — the fear of which can have a

huge impact on people's lives — and antisocial behaviour, which people often feel is not tackled quickly or robustly enough. That is recognised in the Programme for Government, with the inclusion of commitments to reduce the level of serious crime and to tackle crime against older and vulnerable people — through more effective and appropriate sentences and other measures — and to improve community safety by tackling antisocial behaviour. It is important that progress is made in these areas to ensure confidence in the criminal justice system. The Committee has also highlighted the need for targets to reduce serious crime to be consistent with the policing plan for 2012-15.

I welcome the commitment to take forward any necessary changes to tackling crime against older and vulnerable people by imposing more effective and appropriate sentences, as part of the Department of Justice's legislative programme. The House has previously debated the issue of attacks on the elderly, and it sent out the clear message that attacks on the elderly should not and will not be tolerated, and the Programme for Government takes action on that.

The Committee is due to receive a briefing on the draft community safety strategy before the end of March, and it will no doubt want to be satisfied that robust measures to tackle antisocial behaviour are included in the strategy to ensure that the Programme for Government outputs and milestones in that area can be delivered.

I turn to the three major, independent reviews undertaken in the justice system in the past 18 months: the reviews of prisons, youth justice and access to justice. These will be key pieces of work for the Minister and the Department, in which the Committee intends to be closely involved, over the next three years.

The reform and modernisation of the Prison Service has commenced, and the Committee has been receiving regular briefings from the director general of the Prison Service and his senior officials on progress in delivering the strategic efficiency and effectiveness programme and the recommendations in the prison review team's report. The Committee has also been kept fully briefed on the progress of the Prison Service exit scheme and recruitment competition for new custody officers, both of which are delivery milestones in the Programme for Government 2012-13.

I will speak briefly as a member of the DUP. On the issue of Prison Service emblems, name and badge, which was raised in the House by the Minister of Justice, our party has made it clear that we will not allow any change to happen. That was clarified at Committee, when the director general made it clear that this is not part of the reform programme that he is taking forward. It is an issue that will not be coming to the table, because we will not be allowing it to be dealt with. If officials in that Department do not understand how the St Andrews Agreement accountability measures operate, I would like to think that Members should be able to understand how those measures work.

The exit scheme — I have declared an interest on numerous occasions because I have a family member in the Prison Service — was highlighted again at Committee last week. The Committee has concerns about the way in which the scheme is being handled by the Prison Service. Staff were told that they would be allowed to leave with dignity and respect. However, it is unacceptable that the 323 officers involved do not know if they will get out or when they will be told. The Committee has told the Prison Service that that needs to be resolved, and, indeed, I have spoken to the Minister a number of times. Staff were already demoralised. They are even more demoralised now because of the way that the scheme is being handled.

The issue of the very recent resignations of the director general and the change manager and the likely impact on the delivery of the programme were also highlighted at the meeting. The Committee has requested a detailed implementation plan with specific timescales and will use it to monitor progress closely, particularly in relation to the delivery of the commitments in the Programme for Government in that area.

1.15 pm

In relation to the review of access to justice and the review of youth justice, the Committee is expecting details of how the Minister intends to take them forward. It will wish to scrutinise those proposals and the associated action plans, and will want to discuss them with the Minister.

The Committee welcomes the inclusion of a commitment to reduce the number of peace walls but has emphasised that it is a very sensitive issue within communities. Progress

on this must be based on a willingness from the local community to engage and it must be taken forward at a pace with which a particular community is comfortable, if the desired outcome is to be achieved.

Mr Humphrey: I am grateful to the Member for giving way and I welcome the comment he has just made. When politicians make comments from their ivory towers about peace walls being removed from interfaces, the people who have to deal with the daily difficulty of living there are frightened to the core. It is grossly irresponsible of politicians to do that. I welcome the Member's comments.

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member entirely, appreciate the constituency that he represents and the active work that he is involved in on this issue. He brings expertise to the House in that regard.

With respect to capital projects, the Committee welcomes the inclusion of a commitment to construct a new police, prison and fire service training college at Desertcreat, and for it to be substantially completed by 2014-15. Having pressed the Department for progress on a number of occasions, the Committee also highlighted the need for the procurement contract to include social clauses so that the local community can benefit from that project.

I turn to the delivery of the Programme for Government. The Committee will regularly monitor the performance of the Department of Justice against the relevant commitments and milestones in the Programme for Government. Further consideration may need to be given to how progress on the delivery of the inputs required from other Departments to achieve some of the Department of Justice's commitments and outputs, such as improving community safety by tackling antisocial behaviour, will be monitored and measured. The Committee will wish to keep that under review.

I will now briefly make comments in my capacity as an MLA for Lagan Valley. I welcome the recommendation for the development of the Maze/Long Kesh site. That site is critical, not just for the people of Lagan Valley, but for all of Northern Ireland. The Programme for Government recognises that regional significance. We must not allow the future development of the site to be held hostage by its past. Proposals for the site have been taken forward from when David Trimble was

First Minister. David Trimble appointed David Campbell to be the chair of the Maze panel, and he is UUP chairman to this day. In those proposals was the recommendation to deal with the retained element of the site. The Ulster Unionist Party supported it then, it was chaired by David Campbell, and now that party seeks to play politics with that issue. Given the number of members of my family who served in the Prison Service, I understand more acutely than most the sensitivities around this issue. David Campbell got it right when he chaired that body. He put in specific recommendations that it should be neutral, and all of that. Therefore, there will be no glorification of what happened at that site. Quite the opposite: what happened was wrong, and the message that it was wrong should be told. To cynically use victims in the way in which the Ulster Unionist Party now uses them is reprehensible.

Mr Elliott: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he recognise and accept that the original proposals for the Maze were for a huge development, including proposals for a multi-sports stadium and other developments that will now not happen?

Mr Givan: I do not know whether that has changed the position of the Ulster Unionist Party, which appointed the chair of the body that put forward proposals to ensure that the site would be dealt with sensitively. The Member's commentary is, in my view, a poor reflection of where the Ulster Unionist Party was in regard to the development of the site, and where it is today. This site must be developed; it has to be developed.

Mr A Maginness: I remind the Member that many in his own party expressed serious reservations about that site. In fact, they characterised it as being a shrine to terrorism.

Mr Givan: My party has made it very clear that this cannot in any way be a shrine to terrorism, and the mechanisms that are in place ensure that that will not be the case. To play politics with that issue now, however, and the way the Ulster Unionist Party is handling this, is reprehensible and it should not be doing it in the way that it does. Indeed, the leader —

Mr Speaker: The time is almost gone.

Mr Givan: At that, I will conclude. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr A Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I speak as the Chair of the Social Development Committee. Obviously, the Committee came at this from a number of perspectives. Of course, every party and member around the table had their own views, and we took great care to try our best to consult a wide range of stakeholder organisations, which themselves had considerable expertise in a number of the fundamentals in the draft Programme for Government.

The Committee took the view in the early part of its discussions that there were concerns about when the draft Programme for Government was brought forward and the relatively short time within which it could then be fully considered. As I said, however, the Committee then endeavoured to consult as wide a range of organisations as it could, and that was done with integrity and productively.

The Committee acknowledges that the draft Programme for Government was set against the backdrop of a considerable reduction in the block grant that the Executive were anticipating. Therefore, it very much welcomes the fact that the Executive have agreed to take a number of important mitigating actions to minimise the impact that the cuts to the block grant would have, which were important to try to offset those impacts on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Against that background, therefore, and particularly within our remit, the Committee welcomed the emphasis in the Programme for Government document on tackling disadvantage and was very glad to see that that formed part of priority 2 along with key health and education issues. It was important for the Committee that the Programme for Government, therefore, recognised that disadvantage is not about just economic disadvantage, because poverty brings with it disadvantage in health, education and, of course, equality of opportunity. Therefore, we welcome the fact that the Programme for Government establishes a framework within which our young people especially have more opportunities to end that cycle of disadvantage. So, the Committee was glad to see that equality was a guiding principle underpinning the rebuilding of the economy.

There were a number of concerns in respect of housing, not least that the target in the draft Programme for Government was for the provision of 8,000 social and affordable homes. Members expressed the view that that was not enough given the thousands of people on the waiting list. In fact, we believe that up to 20,000 are categorised as being in housing stress. Nevertheless, the Committee took the view that that is an important start and is a target that must be met.

We are keen to continue to engage with the Department on an overall housing strategy. The Department came forward and said that, obviously, we need to have an overarching housing strategy that will encompass social housing, the private sector and housing associations. That is an important development that we look forward to engaging on with the Department in the very near future because we have to address the critical issue of housing need.

Fuel poverty is an important issue for all of us and it was certainly an issue that the Committee recently took on board as a serious initiative. We will soon be coming back to the Assembly with our final report into the work that we have begun on fuel poverty. We clearly recognise that, although the Department for Social Development (DSD) has the lead within the Executive to tackle fuel poverty, it is a multi-agency and cross-departmental responsibility. Therefore, we want to see —

Mr Douglas: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the initiative that the Social Development Committee took to bring the various sections of government and heads of Departments together was very successful? We have to ensure that Departments work together if we are to have a Programme for Government that will have the biggest impact.

Mr A Maskey: I thank the Member for that. I think that the initiative we took, although it dealt specifically with fuel poverty — I remind Members that we brought together eight Departments, eight Committees, 30-odd stakeholder organisations and, at one event, more than 90 people, all at relatively senior levels in their Departments, Committees and different organisations — was about tackling fuel poverty at source and putting the spotlight on that issue as best we could. More importantly, it was about bringing forward constructive ideas. Also, it was to show, when

we hear people saying that things have to be joined up, that the Assembly has to be joined up as well. It is not enough for us, as Members, to say that Departments have to be joined up or that others have to be joined up: we, as an Assembly, and particularly in Committees, have to demonstrate that we can be joined up when it comes to cross-cutting issues. I thank the Member for drawing attention to that matter.

We recognise that there are commitments around what are described as a range of initiatives to tackle fuel poverty in the Programme for Government, and we would like to see those teased out and clearly focused in the very near future.

As far as social enterprise, or the third sector, is concerned, we are very concerned to protect what is a very important sector. We all know that community organisations and other stakeholders play a very important part in general society, and we want to see as much work as possible being carried out by the Department to support that sector on a longer-term, sustainable and strategic basis. So, we look forward to working with the Department and the broader community and voluntary sector to ensure that we maximise the asset that is there for all.

I must also mention welfare reform, because it is clearly an issue that will fall directly into our laps, as a Committee, in the very near future. All parties are very aware that there may well be, and likely will be, some very seriously negative impacts on the people we, collectively, represent. Therefore, we welcome the fact that the Executive have established an advisory group, which will work with the Executive to see where we can take measures to alleviate the worst aspects of this particular welfare reform agenda, as it is called: many of us call it a welfare cuts agenda. With the advisory group, and with close scrutiny of the Bill, the Committee believes that it can work with all concerned to try to protect the most vulnerable and most disadvantaged.

In conclusion, the Committee for Social Development will engage with the Department. The Committee had an issue initially with the draft Programme for Government in that some people felt that it did not carry enough milestones, targets and objectives on a kind of hard, task basis. At the same time, the Department has very firmly given us a commitment to bring forward its implementation

plan once the Programme for Government has been agreed by the Assembly and the Executive. We look forward to working with the Department when it brings forward its implementation plan. We will work with the Department on that plan very constructively and robustly to ensure that the objectives and targets set out in the Programme for Government are delivered for all of the people who we, collectively, represent.

Finally, speaking as an MLA, my party and I accept that there are difficult and challenging times ahead. However, the Executive are committed to doing what they can to develop measures to build the economy, help people into work by creating jobs and work with all of the very important stakeholders who are working at the coalface, whether it be in welfare reform, education, health and all of the other very important community assets.

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

We look forward to the development of the Programme for Government. We know that it is set against the very negative financial backdrop of the cuts that have come from London. Nevertheless, I wish the Executive well in meeting those challenges. I have no doubt that there is enough innovation, drive and commitment in the draft Programme for Government that, if it is carried through and delivered on, we will make lives a bit better for the people we represent.

Mr Frew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development): I rise as Chairperson of the Committee to present the Committee's view on this Programme for Government. As part of the Committee's scrutiny process, we met Minister O'Neill and her officials on 14 February, when she outlined the Department's input into the draft Programme for Government. I and other Committee members shared a number of concerns with her. The Committee then met departmental officials on 28 February to further discuss the draft Programme in greater detail, and a number of concerns were raised by me and other Committee members.

Those include what the Committee considers to be serious omissions, particularly around the eradication of bovine TB, forestry issues, countryside management and Europe. I will come back to those issues shortly, particularly to bovine TB.

1.30 pm

The four DARD commitments that were outlined by the Minister and her officials are to bring forward a £13 million package to tackle rural poverty and social and economic isolation in the next three years; to eradicate brucellosis by March 2014; to develop a strategic plan for the agrifood sector, in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment; and to advance the relocation of the headquarters of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to a rural area by 2015. I shall take each target in turn and present the Committee's view.

I noted that the target on rural poverty and social and economic isolation is under priority 2. The Committee welcomes the capital injection on that issue and recognises the fact that the Department has launched the rural poverty and social isolation framework, which outlines the priority areas and actions that the Department will lead on to address those issues. From the briefing by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development, the Committee understands that the programme target is to build on the work undertaken in the previous Programme for Government. It is also part of the wider rural development programme. The Committee hopes that the actions identified by the Department are realised and that it is not a case of funds being soaked up by the administration of the scheme rather than actual investment in the rural economy. The Committee also asked about how that aspect of the Programme for Government will be aligned to the targeting social need strategy. We look forward to seeing the development of working documents and action plans for delivery in the near future.

Although I welcome the target of the eradication of brucellosis by March 2014, it is worthy of note that the last confirmed case of the disease was recorded in July 2011. There has been a steady decline since 2008, which is progress towards being brucellosis-free, and the Committee supports DARD in that. It is a terrible disease and is totally deserving of being a Programme for Government target. The Committee fully supports the Department, the PSNI and the industry in the identification and prosecution of the minority who deliberately infect their livestock to gain a financial advantage. Officials outlined the cost to the economy of a brucellosis outbreak, which would be between £10 million and £20 million.

Becoming brucellosis-free will also free up staff, vet time, resources and administration support that can be directed elsewhere — to bovine TB, for example.

All in all, there is a broad welcome for the target. However, the Committee is extremely concerned and disappointed that no targets have been set for the eradication of TB. It is hard to comprehend how an issue of such magnitude has been omitted from the Programme for Government. The fact that it was included in the previous Programme for Government with a target of reducing the annual herd incidence of TB by 27% adds to the confusion being experienced by the industry. When pressed on that in Committee, departmental officials admitted that it was not included because they could not find a SMART target that they could commit to. They stated:

“We could not come up with a target that we could achieve, deliver or aspire to.”

Additionally, Minister O’Neill said that she was not confident that TB could be eradicated in the Programme for Government timescale. That is simply not good enough. Just because something is hard does not mean to say that it should not be included as a target. The Committee firmly believes that, if officials put their minds to it, they could come up with SMART targets on the reduction and progress to eradication that could be achieved in the timescale.

One wonders what the Department’s mindset is when it has decided not to include it, bearing in mind the Public Accounts Committee’s report on the control of bovine TB in Northern Ireland, published in June 2009, which stated that £200 million of taxpayers’ money had not been explicitly aimed at the eradication of TB and that the Department had failed to meet the challenge. The Committee calls on the Department to develop a more strategic approach to tackling bovine TB, with a clear focus on the reduction and eradication of the disease. That will help to bring Northern Ireland in line with the vast majority of the rest of Europe. We expect to see greater urgency in the Department to achieve that. In fact, I call on the Minister and the Executive to consider adding that as a priority to the Programme for Government.

The development of a strategic plan for the agrifood sector in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment

is a good example of joined-up government, which the Committee welcomes. The agrifood sector contributes in excess of £3 billion to the economy. It employs almost 100,000 people and is the only sector to have shown sustained growth over the past few years. The Department has advised that it plans to develop the current Focus on Food strategy. The Committee has concerns that the Republic of Ireland has already published its 2020 strategy and feels that the Department is lagging behind in the development of the strategy and has displayed a lack of ambition and drive at a time when the agrifood sector has such a positive future.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to intervene on that point. Our party held a conference on the agrifood sector only last week, and we learned that we are some two years behind the South of Ireland. There is no mention in the document of the lifting of the milk quota or CAP reforms and the implications that that will have for agriculture. Does the Member agree that that is a serious omission by the Minister?

Mr Frew: Thank you for your intervention, and thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing it. Yes, I do. It is something that the Minister must take very seriously. Of course, we cannot include everything in the Programme for Government. This Programme for Government is set in a very focused and directed way, and we welcome that, as does, I am sure, the Assembly. However, there must be an onus on Departments to make sure that they include everything that will have the greatest impact on our people in Northern Ireland.

It is difficult to comment on the Department’s target regarding the construction and refurbishment of a hypothetical building in a hypothetical location by 2015. Although the Committee would welcome investment in the construction industry, which is very important and is dear to my heart, it has concerns that the estimated £26 million costs will not be sufficient to complete the project. We await sight of the business plan to ensure that targets and budgets are achievable.

The Committee has also expressed concern that each of the four targets will not have an adequate budget allocated to it and that a bid for additional resources may have to be made. The Department has advised us that, as yet, no money has been set aside or identified for two of its targets. That is a major concern for

the Committee, particularly given the financial constraints that we face.

The Committee feels that the targets identified by the Department are not challenging enough. The Department has chosen the easy option and has chosen to omit real and meaningful targets, such as the eradication of bovine TB, which, to me, is critical to the health and well-being of the farming and agriculture industry in the future.

The Committee also understands that the detail of other missing priorities, such as targets for forestry, will be in the 2012-13 departmental business plan. The Committee hopes to look at that plan post Easter and will seek to guarantee that it will contain significant and quantifiable targets.

Mr McMullan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will. You have just caught me.

Mr McMullan: Does the Member agree that the legal cases that are going on now in England and Wales could have a bearing on anything to do with the bovine cases here?

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I do not accept that. The legal aspect centres on only one element of an eradication plan and relates to reservoirs and wildlife. There is still so much more that the Department and the Minister could do to tackle bovine TB, and I would like to see it happen.

Mr Nesbitt: I speak as our party's education spokesman, but, first, may I give an overarching welcome to the arrival of the Programme for Government to the Floor? We need not rehearse the importance, relevance and timeliness that we attached to devising a Programme for Government; that is well documented.

We now move to the fact that, once this is agreed, as it undoubtedly will be, delivery becomes king. I noted with interest the comments that the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party made at its last party conference, in La Mon. He said:

"People want to see the Executive taking decisions and making a difference. That's what we are elected to do. The new imperative is getting things done."

I could be churlish and wonder what the imperative was under the last mandate, but the new imperative is getting things done, which is to be supported, as are his words in opening

the debate that we must achieve delivery in a way that is seen, felt and understood on the ground. We will have no difficulty supporting that.

Please allow me, however, a moment of scepticism about the measures of delivery. Last week, as we reviewed the performance of the previous Programme for Government with officials at the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, we discovered that the traffic light system of red, amber and green, which had been the original measure of achievement, had been amended, and a fourth category of amber-green inserted between amber and green. It seems to me that that greatly impacts on the percentage of measures that could be described as achieved. I believe that one member mentioned the word "gerrymander" at that Committee meeting, but I will leave it there and move on.

I want to spend the rest of my time addressing the Programme for Government under the theme of education, focusing on three areas: the point of education, the schools estate and special educational need. It may seem a little simplistic to say that I want to talk about the point of education. However, having been party spokesman and Deputy Chair of the Education Committee for only five weeks, I am already very clear that you can spend long hours debating education without ever mentioning pupils. I want to mention them now.

In a former life, as a school governor, I was sometimes asked to speak at open days to prospective parents and pupils. I used to talk about the spark that lies within every child, without exception. It is a spark of ability, creativity and talent. Our job is to find that spark and not get hung up about whether it is academic or vocational, sporting or artistic. We simply need to find it and give the child the tools to grow that spark into a passion for learning and for life. Last year, I was delighted to come across a book called 'The Element', written by creative thinker Sir Ken Robinson, who, I believe, has previously advised the Department for Employment and Learning and is currently advising the Ilex project in Londonderry. Sir Ken's 'Element' is my spark. I hope that, as we go forward with the educational elements of the Programme for Government, we can bear in mind that that spark is king to the future of our children.

Sir Ken also addresses post-primary education and how you transfer in a way that the Programme for Government does not. I commend this thought to you: what we need to do is address the question of post-primary transfer and recognise that, under the 11-plus, we asked the wrong question of our children. Previously, we asked them, “How intelligent are you?”, and then determined to measure that in the narrow ground of their academic ability in maths, English and science. Sir Ken says that that is the wrong question. The right question is “In what way are you intelligent? Are you academic, vocational, sporting or artistic?”.

I suggest that there is, perhaps, more hope of agreement in the House than some people might imagine about the future of post-primary transfer. I will quote the Education Minister, speaking in the Chamber on 13 December last year:

“I am not fixated on the title that a school wishes to give itself. It can call itself a grammar school, high school, college; I am not fixated on its title.” — [Official Report, Vol 70, No 2, p85, col 2].

He goes on to say:

“I want to see an education estate that is open to all young people and centres of education that do not ask children at the age of 11, ‘are you clever?’, but ask, ‘how are you clever?’ It is the duty of educationalists to grow that acorn and to light the spirit of education in every pupil.” — [Official Report, Vol 70, No 2, p86, col 1].

I suggest that there is not much between what the Minister said in December 2011 and what I say in March 2012. Think only of Rory McIlroy, who attended a grammar school a few miles from the Building. Had he been forced to complete only an academic education, only the Members for North Down might know him as perhaps an up-and-coming solicitor in Holywood and not a global superstar.

1.45 pm

I move to the schools estate, where there is a real challenge of delivery, with four systems and an incredibly complex map of governance. My party supports a two-phased move to a single system of education, with a middle ground of shared resources. I recognise and applaud the commitment in the Programme for Government to a greater emphasis on sharing resources. However, there are no real targets, and I would like to see more as we move forward. I also recognise the need in the House to set the

strategic direction for shared resources and to open the way for local solutions to make it happen. We must recognise that people and communities are likely to move forward at different speeds and at different times. In evidence to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the First Minister said:

“We also see education as a way of tackling the divisions in our society. That is why we have committed to establishing a ministerial advisory group to explore and bring forward recommendations to the Minister of Education on how to advance shared education.”

I would like to see that ministerial advisory group up and running, its terms of reference and the timescale for it to report.

This party will support the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority if it is a better way of administering the schools estate, but not if it is a back door to social engineering.

My third point relates to special educational needs. I am surprised that it has become the biggest issue for families who have approached me for advocacy since I joined the Education Committee. Several primary-school principals have taken me into their study and produced the manual from the Department on special educational needs. It is a big manual containing 439 A4 pages, and it is handed to teachers with this instruction: “You decide. You make the call”. It seems to me that the head teachers to whom I have spoken are unanimous in feeling that it is not a manual to help them but a way for the Department to displace responsibility and put it on the shoulders of hard-pressed senior teachers in our schools. Teachers in one primary school in my constituency in the main town of Newtownards informed me that they had 50.2 hours of educational psychology assessment time available to them this year and asked how they were supposed to divide that up when they probably needed 100 or 150 hours to do the right thing by all their pupils.

My colleague Michael Copeland from East Belfast has mentioned and has now proved that some educational psychologists use a stopwatch in assessing the needs of children with special educational needs and that the stopwatch is turned on and off even for a short telephone conversation. I say this to the House, particularly those who were against the 11-plus transfer system on the grounds that it was the equivalent

of child abuse: beware that how we assess special educational need is not the new 11-plus.

I conclude with these overarching remarks about the Programme for Government. Whether it is education, the economy or the health service, let teachers teach, let doctors and nurses tend the sick, and let business people do business. Let them generate wealth, jobs and the tax revenue that will fund excellence in our public services, and — let us not forget — our salaries.

Mr Doherty (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Regional Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for bringing this debate to the House. I speak today as the Deputy Chair of the Committee for Regional Development and base my comments on the Committee's report 'Response to the Consultation on the Draft Programme for Government 2011-15, the Draft Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland 2011-21 and the Draft Economic Strategy', which was published on 25 January this year. I will restrict my comments to those relating to the motion.

The Programme for Government contains six commitments that fall to the Department for Regional Development. The first commitment is to progress the upgrade of key road projects and improve the overall road network to ensure that journey times on key transport corridors reduce by 2.5% against the 2003 baseline by March 2015. The second is to ensure that there will be no additional water charges during this Programme for Government period. The third is to upgrade the Coleraine to Derry railway line. The fourth is to invest over £500 million to promote more sustainable modes of travel. The fifth commitment is to create the conditions to facilitate at least 36% of primary-school pupils and 22% of secondary-school pupils to walk or cycle to school as their main mode of transport by 2015. The sixth is to maintain a high quality of drinking water and improve compliance with waste water standards by investing £600 million in water and sewerage infrastructure. With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I will briefly address each commitment.

I am delighted that there has been significant progress towards the first target — the progressing of key road projects — following the announcement of £330 million, £105 million and £57 million to the A5, A8 and A2 networks

respectively. That will make a major contribution to the economy in the North as a whole and, in the case of the A5, to the north-west in particular. It is estimated that the multiplier ratio is 3:1, meaning a financial injection of nearly £1 billion. Although that is welcomed by all, it is important to note that the target to reduce journey times by 2.5% against the 2003 baseline was deficient in two ways. First, targets exist for the reduction of journey times through the upgrading of key roads while no targets are in place to improve public transport times, where it is claimed that journey times are increasing. Secondly, the reduction of 2.5% was against a 2003 baseline rather than a more recent starting point. That was not seen as significantly challenging to the Department.

The commitment to ensure that no additional water charges would be levied during this Programme for Government period was welcomed by organisations representing the public but caused concern to those charged with delivering and scrutinising the water and waste water targets. These concerns did not necessarily centre on the fact that charges would not be applied but on the governance processes resulting from NI Water being designated a non-departmental public body for accounting purposes. It was argued that that came with constraints that impact on NIW's ability to deliver priority works and maximise efficiencies and performances for customers. In addition, there was a concern that funding did not appear to be adequate, with consequent risks for future levels of service and the potential for EU infringement. Undoubtedly, those are serious concerns, and the Committee will wish to receive the Minister for Regional Development and his officials to commence discussion on the governance arrangements of NIW in the very near future.

The third pledge is to upgrade the Coleraine to Derry railway line. Again, we have seen some early commitments to that upgrade with emergency remedial works being undertaken to ensure that an important section of the track is available for the majority of the City of Culture celebrations. I commend the Minister for Regional Development for his engagement with the Committee in that respect. We hope that the full upgrade can be completed as soon as possible, bringing about further improvements and improved connectivity between the north-west and the remainder of the cities and towns in the North and in the South.

The fourth commitment is to invest over £500 million to promote more sustainable modes of transport. The Committee heard that there appeared to be a conflict between the sustainable transport objectives in the Programme for Government and those contained in major existing policy documents, such as the regional transport strategy, particularly with regard to the fact that the budget appears to be moving away from the 65:35 funding split between roads and public transport. It was suggested that only approximately 14% to 15% of the budget would now be available for investment in public transport and that the investment of £500 million would be used to maintain passenger numbers at 77 million per annum. That target has been in place since 2008 and was said to be indicative of the fact that the Programme for Government merely sought to maintain the status quo and would not create the environment and circumstances that would bring about a significant modal shift away from cars to public transport.

The fifth commitment seeks, by 2015, to create the conditions to enable at least 36% of primary-school pupils and 22% of secondary-school pupils to walk or cycle to school as their main mode of transport. That is universally welcomed, and the Committee was able to see the potential for such a target when it witnessed pupils at Gilnahirk Primary School take part in the Bike It programme. The one criticism of the target was that it restricted itself to the education sector and did not expand into, for example, the commute to work.

The final target is to maintain a high quality of drinking water and to improve compliance with waste water standards by investing £600 million in the water and sewerage infrastructure. I covered the concerns about the governance of NIW earlier and will not recount them again. However, the levels of funding identified in the Programme for Government and ISNI caused grave concern, as they will drop significantly up to and beyond 2015. Funding is currently at £188 million per annum. However, it will drop to £167 million per annum by 2015 and will drop again to £100 million per annum for the period up to 2021. It was estimated that it costs up to £80 million per annum just to maintain the base asset, and that leaves very little to invest in infrastructure, particularly given the lack of opportunity to carry capital funding over the financial years.

A number of respondents stated that the milestones and outcomes accompanying the commitments were not SMART and were vague and unambitious, which would, therefore, lead to difficulty in assessing progress. Again, it was felt that an opportunity had been lost to use appropriate milestones to drive the Programme for Government commitments, resulting in a tick-box exercise rather than a meaningful analysis of progress. It was seen as a priority that clear, measurable and ambitious targets were needed for each commitment. It was seen as important that the delegation of Executive commitments to individual departmental corporate plans should also result in meaningful, measurable and ambitious targets and outcomes. The Committee for Regional Development —

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

Mr Doherty: — is due to receive the departmental senior management team on 27 March, and I assure the House that we will seek to ensure that the corporate plan contains meaningful, measurable and ambitious targets.

Mr A Maginness: This is a curious piece of political retrofitting. The normal thing is to have a Programme for Government and then a Budget. However, we have done it the other way round, and we are now trying to retrofit a Programme for Government to the Budget. That, of course, is not a satisfactory way to do business. Putting the cart before the horse is certainly not an efficient or effective way of conducting our affairs in the Assembly or the Executive.

Ten months after the election, we have a Programme for Government. Surely, that is a serious criticism of the Executive.

2.00 pm

That having been said, however, my party welcomes the fact that a Programme for Government has now, finally, been produced and is subject to scrutiny and debate. One could not object to many parts of the programme; in fact, one would support them. It is a motherhood-and-apple-pie approach to government and government programming. One cannot object to much of the document's details, and my party broadly agrees with its five priorities. However, we are, rightly, concerned about the lack of detail that is provided on each of those five priorities, the vagueness of many of the key

commitments in each priority area and the lack of measurable targets in the document.

That has been reflected throughout the debate by other Members. Mr Frew said that agriculture targets are not challenging enough; Mr Nesbitt said that there are no real targets on education policy; and Mr Mervyn Storey, who also spoke from an education perspective, said that there is a lack of measurable targets in that Department's area of competence.

One could look throughout the document and see a lack of measurable targeting. If there is to be a Programme for Government, it needs to have measurable targets. One must be able to say that because one is approaching a particular point in time, one will, therefore, have achieved a particular target. That is remarkably absent throughout the document.

Other issues are absent from the document that should be contained in it, such as mortgage relief; there is no commitment to a mortgage relief scheme. Indeed, recently, the Social Development Minister, Nelson McCausland, announced officially that there would be no mortgage relief scheme. Unlike his unofficial announcement on travel passes for over-60s, that was an official announcement.

Ms Ritchie: Does the Member agree that the position of the current Minister for Social Development contrasts with that of his predecessors, who gave a commitment to provide for a mortgage relief scheme?

Mr A Maginness: Indeed. I am grateful for that timely reminder. The previous Minister gave that commitment. I assumed that there was consensus in the House in favour of it. I am not certain whether the Minister has gone on a solo run again. Perhaps, the deputy First Minister or, indeed, the First Minister can advise us on that.

On welfare reform — one of the most far-reaching policies to affect Northern Ireland and the Executive — there is an absence of any plan to counteract the serious impact of those reforms in Northern Ireland, and there is faint-hearted opposition from the Executive to those so-called reforms, which have been imposed on us by the Conservative Government at Westminster. There is no planning, and no account has been taken in the Programme for Government to deal with the adverse impact of welfare reform.

Again, with regard to social development, there is a commitment to provide 8,000 houses over the next three years. If one looks at that, however, one sees that it does not mean 8,000 newbuilds. It means, perhaps, 5,500 or almost 6,000 newbuilds. The rest will be affordable housing.

Affordable housing is welcome and one cannot object to it but it should be separate from newbuild social housing. Newbuild programmes have a huge multiplier effect on the overall economy, and it is through such programmes that we will stimulate our economy. However, they are absent from this document, and we are not maximising the potential that we have in that area.

There is a passing reference to and commitments to renewable energy, and those are also to be welcomed. However, you do not sense that the Executive are taking up the challenge on renewable energy or that they really understand the massive potential that it presents to the Northern Ireland economy.

The green new deal has disappeared below the floorboards. Where has it gone? Is there any serious commitment on the part of the Executive to the green new deal? The green new deal could transform our energy consumption and create a situation in which private and public housing can become more energy efficient and save our owner-occupiers and tenants an endless amount of money. Fuel efficiency is the one instrument that we have to counteract fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, yet it is absent from the Programme for Government.

There are vague aspirations in the document, but no tight targets or direction have been given. For example, there is nothing in the document that takes account of the expanding needs of older people in this community. Those needs are expanding year by year, and no sector has a greater need than our older people. There is also nothing of any substance in the document for victims of the past or for victims of crime. There is very little by way of a serious impact on the whole area of victims.

We can also look for a reference to the European dimension. There is a mention of that dimension, but it is vestigial and non-substantive, and there is no real engagement with the European institutions or any attempt to energise our politics to make them Euro-friendly. However, that is hardly surprising, given that the parties of the First Minister and the deputy First

Minister are antipathetic to Europe. You cannot be surprised by the lack of a vigorous pro-European approach from those parties.

Mr Bell: Will the Member give way?

Mr A Maginness: No, I am nearly finished.

Where is the North/South dimension in the Programme for Government? There is no serious expansion of the North/South — *[Interruption.]* I hear that Members on the DUP Benches agree with that, but there must be progress on that.

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

Mr A Maginness: There is enormous economic potential to be gained from us working together, North and South. We must work hard to develop that dimension.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):

The Committee first considered this matter on 15 December 2011, when it received correspondence from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister asking for the views of the Statutory Committees on the draft Programme for Government and draft investment strategy for Northern Ireland.

Recognising its importance, and in anticipation of receiving that correspondence, the Committee had agreed to write to all the DCAL arm's-length bodies to seek their views, particularly about whether they felt that any gaps existed, and for their comments on milestones and outputs and on how best to monitor progress.

The Committee received and considered responses from six arm's-length bodies: the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Foras na Gaeilge, Libraries NI, NI Screen, the Northern Ireland Museums Council and Sport NI. It also took views from DCAL officials, focusing in particular on the Department's commitments in the strategy and its delivery vehicles. The Committee noted with some concern that DCAL is responsible for the delivery of only three of the 82 commitments in the Programme for Government: namely, to support 200 projects through the creative industries innovation fund; to develop sports stadiums as agreed with the IFA, the GAA and Ulster Rugby; and to host the World Police and Fire Games in 2013. Although they appear significant, those three commitments form less than 4% of the

Executive's targets and are, in most cases, already well advanced. Although the Committee in no way underestimates the huge task that now faces the Department to successfully complete the implementation of the projects and notes the significant contribution that they can make to the Northern Ireland economy if success is achieved, it questions whether the three given commitments are sufficiently challenging for the Department over the 2011-15 period.

Looking beyond individual departmental issues, the Committee acknowledges that the main priority in the Programme for Government is to build a strong and vibrant economy and recognises the potential economic benefits of each of the given commitments. As I have already mentioned, the first priority set aside for DCAL relates to the creative industries. It is well documented and widely accepted that that sector has the potential to make significant economic and social contributions to society. However, in order that its capacity for job and wealth creation is maximised, it is essential that the correct supporting mechanisms are in place. Those mechanisms will need to ensure that conditions are right to stimulate industry growth and to maximise and harness economic benefits.

The Committee's ongoing inquiry into maximising the potential of the creative industries is well placed to examine the policies, strategies and frameworks that oversee the development and growth of the creative industries and to determine whether they are effective and fit for purpose. The Committee recognises that the creative industries innovation fund (CIIF) is one such mechanism that supports the growth of our creative industries. Therefore, it welcomes the Programme for Government pledge for the continued support of 200 projects through the fund.

However, it is noted that the current fund allocation shows a 40% reduction over the previous one, with an allocation of just £4 million over four years as opposed to £5 million over three years in the previous fund. The resources pledged for the purpose are critical to the ongoing expansion of the creative industries, and the allocation is, perhaps, not truly indicative of the value of the fund in maximising the tangible economic benefits and growth in turnover among CIIF-assisted companies.

The Committee also acknowledges the contribution that the three sports stadia and the World Police and Fire Games will make to the economy. The stadia have the potential to attract increased revenue streams from spectators and the opportunity to create immediate benefits for the construction sector. Those projected benefits are, of course, in addition to the estimated £15.5 million that will be attracted from hosting the World Police and Fire Games. In the wider sporting arena, I want to acknowledge the addition of the target to support the successful hosting of the 2012 Irish Open and to secure a further international golf event. That will, undoubtedly, benefit the economy and boost our tourism numbers.

Although we are pleased to note the Executive's intention to have a more focused and structured approach to the Programme for Government's commitments and, as I have outlined, recognise the impact that the DCAL commitments will have, we are not convinced that they fully reflect the Department's contribution to all five strategic priorities.

2.15 pm

Some of the gaps that were identified when reflecting DCAL's contribution include sports and museums. The question was raised of whether museums generally receive significant recognition. That is indeed a salient point. A review that the previous Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure carried out found that the museums sector contributes £16 million to the economy and accounts for the top four tourist attractions in Northern Ireland. It is encouraging to see that the target for tourism in the final PFG has increased from having 3.6 million visitors to having 4.2 million, with an increase in revenue of a further £51 million. However, it is disappointing that the contribution of the museums sector to cultural tourism, particularly in view of the number of commemoration events that the museums sector will host this year, is not adequately reflected in the Programme for Government.

On sport, it was noted that the PFG fails to appropriately recognise the significant contribution of DCAL's Sport Matters strategy, which addresses all, not just one, of the PFG's priorities. In addition, other gaps were noted in grassroots sport, physical recreation, film, attendance at arts events, angling and the 2012 Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. Those

were of particular concern, as that position appeared to be at odds with the previous PFG commitments. As the World Police and Fire Games and the three stadiums will be in Belfast, concerns were also raised that the Department's commitments through the PFG were largely Belfast-centric. The Committee suggested that the Department will wish to satisfy itself that those commitments are equitable and benefit all of Northern Ireland.

With 85% of the Department's work delivered through its arm's-length bodies, some issues were raised about accountability and the delivery of the projects. As an example, CIIF is administered by the Arts Council in association with the Digital Circle and NI Screen, but delivery of the World Police and Fire Games is the responsibility of World Police and Fire Games 2013, and the three sports stadiums will be delivered by the IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby. Responsibility and accountability for the delivery of each project lies with those bodies, while DCAL has overall responsibility for ensuring that appropriate systems, processes, policies and funding are in place. The Committee noted that DCAL must put in place the appropriate support and set targets and milestones for the delivery of those projects in line with SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound — objectives and retain a robust oversight role. There must also be accountability at departmental level.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I welcome the opportunity to address the House as Chair of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Like other Members, I welcome the publication of the Programme for Government today.

The Committee took evidence on the draft Programme for Government from officials on 14 December 2011. One of our concerns at the time was that of the 76 key commitments, only five related to the Department of Health, yet, across all Departments, the Department spends over 40% of the total resource budget. I note that in the Programme for Government published today, there are now six targets for health. That increase is welcome, but there are still relatively few targets for a Department that is the size of the Health Department and that is responsible for the amount of money that it spends.

One of the Department's commitments in the Programme for Government is to reconfigure and reform health and social care services. We know that that will be driven by the review of health and social care, which was published on 13 December 2011. When the Committee considered the draft Programme for Government, we were concerned that there did not seem to be a clear link between the Programme for Government and the recommendations coming out of the review. In particular, we could not see any evidence that the Programme for Government would be used to monitor or measure the changes that are proposed in the review.

However, I am pleased to see that in the revised Programme for Government, which has been published today, there is clear reference to the review of health and social care. In year 1, there is now a target to develop population plans to deliver a new model of care, as set out in the review. In year 2, there is a target to reduce the number of unnecessary days that patients stay in acute hospitals. In year 3, there is a target to secure a shift from hospital to community services, along with a shift in funding in line with the recommendations in the review. It is important that the review, given its impact on the future of health and social care, is placed firmly in the context of the Programme for Government.

The targets on allocating an increasing percentage of the overall health budget to public health have been changed. In the draft document, there were simply references to the additional amount of money to be invested each year, but we now have a target for year 1 of setting new policy directions to strengthen cross-departmental working. For year 2, there is a target to extend bowel screening to everyone aged 60 to 74, and in year 3, the target is simply to spend £10 million more on public health compared with in 2011-12. The Committee had asked that the targets should quote the increase in percentage terms as well as cash terms. Unfortunately, that has not been done, so we do not know whether £10 million extra on public health is a 1% rise or a 10% rise on what we are currently spending.

Under the priority of protecting our people, the environment and creating safer communities, there is a commitment, which was not in the draft Programme for Government, for the Department of Health, Social Services

and Public Safety to improve safeguarding for children and vulnerable adults. That is a very welcome addition to the Programme for Government. Sometimes, the social care aspect of the Department can be overlooked, and we get too focused on health and hospitals. So, it is good to see that target included.

The Department is aiming to produce a joint strategy to address domestic and sexual violence and abuse in year 1. That will be an important step forward, and the Committee wrote to the Minister about that issue just a few weeks ago. There is also a target to develop an interdepartmental child safeguarding policy framework. The Safeguarding Board is due to be established in June and, hopefully, it will be involved in that work.

Under the priority for delivering high-quality public service, there is a new target of rolling out the family nurse partnership programme to a further test site. That programme is all about early intervention and support for young parents and children, and it is welcome as the Committee is firmly in favour of prevention and supporting people so that they do not end up needing services or end up in crisis further down the line.

In conclusion, on behalf of the Committee, I welcome the publication of the Programme for Government, and I assure the House that we will work closely with the Departments to ensure that they meet their targets.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Members, we have to interrupt this debate for Question Time. I ask you to take your ease for a few moments until we commence at 2.30 pm.

The debate stood suspended.

2.30 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Social Development

Mr Deputy Speaker: Questions 1, 5, 11 and 13 have been withdrawn and require written answer.

Benefits

2. **Mr McCallister** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the benefits to which the annual expenditure of £300 million that is under the control of the Executive is allocated. (AQO 1504/11-15)

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): The £300 million that is referred to is the current total estimated expenditure on rates relief, which is approximately £130 million; the main passported benefits, which total approximately £140 million; and the discretionary elements of the social fund, which total approximately £30 million. The Executive administer all non-social-security benefits, which are commonly referred to as passported benefits. The range of passported benefits is extensive, and payment is generally predicated on the claimant being in receipt of a social security benefit. There are approximately 30 passported benefits, including legal aid, free school meals, free health service dental treatment, disabled facilities grants, and numerous other benefits.

In addition, from April 2013, the Executive will resume responsibility for the replacement scheme for the discretionary social fund and for the rates element of housing benefit. Although discussions are ongoing between the Department of Finance and Personnel and Her Majesty's Treasury, there are planned reductions of at least 10% in the funding for discretionary funding and rates relief from the 2013 and 2014 financial years. I will discuss passported benefits with Lord Freud when I meet him in London tomorrow.

Mr McCallister: I thank the Minister for his response. Will he confirm that free travel for the over-60s is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development? Therefore, will he detail what discussions he had with the Minister for

Regional Development before he made his public remarks on 29 February?

Mr McCausland: Free transport for senior citizens was introduced by a DUP Minister.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr McCausland: It was introduced by my colleague who is sitting beside me. It remains the policy of the party that it should be retained. It is a policy with which I agree. It is a policy that I support. It is unfortunate that some comments were misconstrued, but I state categorically that I have never advocated that it be changed. I confirm that it is a matter for the Minister for Regional Development, and I am sure that he will do the right thing and retain the free transport.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister stated that the Executive will be responsible for the replacement scheme for the discretionary elements of the social fund. Will he give the House more detail on what the plans are?

Mr McCausland: The Department has carried out significant research to consider how we can replace the current scheme. The first phase of that work has been completed, and I will receive recommendations on the way forward in the near future. I will then bring a paper to the Executive for consideration.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will he confirm that all Social Security Agency staff positions, particularly those that provide front line services for many of the people who face the worst ravages of welfare reform, including the transition from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance (ESA), will be maintained at their current level of deployment?

Mr McCausland: There will, undoubtedly, be changes in the delivery of services over the next while in a number of ways. First, the Member will be well aware of the process of trying to bring together jobs and benefits in single offices. In addition, there is the fact that we in Northern Ireland provide services for a number of regions of Great Britain. It is important that we do all that we can to ensure that those jobs are retained in Northern Ireland because it is a very substantial number of jobs and it is a major boost to the local economy that the contracts for those regions of Great Britain have been secured by our staff here in Northern Ireland.

So, it is important that we have a robust and efficient service in Northern Ireland for our staff and those whom we serve across the water.

Welfare Reform Legislation

3. **Mr P Ramsey** asked the Minister for Social Development to outline the flexibilities that exist for Northern Ireland within the confines of parity. (AQO 1505/11-15)

9. **Mr Copeland** asked the Minister for Social Development what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State following his recent remarks regarding the substantial degree of flexibility that exists within the confines of parity. (AQO 1511/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With the Deputy Speaker's permission, I will answer questions 3 and 9 together, as both ask about flexibilities within the confines of parity.

I and my Executive colleagues on the subcommittee on welfare reform recently started to explore a range of flexibilities that we believe may exist within the confines of parity. That important work is at an early stage. We are trying to focus on maximising all available flexibilities to help to mitigate the negative impacts of the Welfare Reform Bill. I also had a constructive meeting with the Secretary of State, at which we discussed how we can work together on welfare reform, including exploring possible areas for flexibility. I have had, and will continue to have, regular contact with not only the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland but Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) Ministers. As I mentioned, I will be in London tomorrow to meet David Freud and Iain Duncan Smith.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his reply. Does he acknowledge that due to the 40-year conflict that we had, a higher incidence of people here are on disability benefits, particularly due to mental health-related matters, and a special case must be made? Will he assure the House that he will take that message, loud and clear, to his meeting with Freud?

Mr McCausland: I assure the Member that the point will be raised tomorrow; it is one that we have raised on quite a number of occasions. It is clear that there is a difference between the profiles of disability living allowance benefit in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. More people are on that benefit here as a result of mental

health issues than in Great Britain. That is something that we need to look at. I am sure that the reasons for it are varied, but I have no doubt that the impact and legacy of the Troubles contribute to that. That is very much in our thinking, and they are aware of that difference, as we move forward.

Mr Copeland: I, too, thank the Minister for his answers. Is he aware of any previous breaches or tests of parity that have not resulted in a fiscal penalty?

Mr McCausland: There are areas in which flexibility is possible. They seem to be around, basically, operational issues, on which the focus is at present. The Member, rightly, recognises the fundamental principle of parity, but we know that, within that, there is the opportunity for some flexibility in areas such as operational issues. At present, the Executive's all-party subcommittee is looking at all the possible areas in which there may be a desire for flexibility. We are already negotiating and will continue to negotiate with Westminster in regard to those issues. So, for the moment, the focus is on identifying the possible areas.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The British Government have allocated in the region of £100 million to bring back into use empty homes in north-east England and £1 billion to supplement the work contract to get young people into employment. In respect of that, has there been any consequential benefit to the Executive here?

Mr McCausland: I assume that the Member is referring to the announcement in the media this morning by the coalition Government's Housing Minister, Grant Shapps, of an increase in the maximum discounts that social housing tenants in England will be able to receive if they exercise their right to buy their home. A number of issues were announced this morning, and we will certainly look at what the implications may be for here. I assume that this is not something that has implications across the United Kingdom; the announcement was specifically in regard to England. We have responsibility for such matters in Northern Ireland, but if there are lessons to be learned, we can certainly look at them. However, as the Member would be aware, we received the information only this morning.

Mr Campbell: The Minister indicated that he would have further meetings with DWP officials

and Ministers in the near future. When he does so, will he reassure the House that, operating within the flexibility arrangements that he would like to get and that parity brings, he will try to ensure that DWP spells out the cost that a breach of parity would bring to people in Northern Ireland, particularly to those who are in receipt of benefits? I mean the cost that that would bring to such people through less in benefits being paid to them.

Mr McCausland: The Member makes an important point in spelling out clearly the detrimental implications for people in Northern Ireland if there were to be a breach of parity. That point has now been made by a range of stakeholders, and there is a growing recognition that some of the suggestions made by some folk earlier about rampant running ahead and just breaking parity here, there and yonder are simply untenable. There is a genuine recognition across the board that we cannot afford to do that. I will certainly continue to get some clarity around the financial implications so that people are well aware of them, if there are any doubts that remain.

Business Improvement Districts

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Social Development what towns in the Newry and Armagh constituency will benefit from the business improvement district proposals. (AQO 1506/11-15)

15. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the legislation to introduce business improvement districts. (AQO 1517/11-15)

Mr McCausland: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 4 and 15 together as they are both about business improvement districts (BIDs).

All towns and cities in Northern Ireland can benefit from my proposals for business improvement districts if they wish to do so. The legislation will be flexible enough to allow local discretion and for the development of local solutions. The onus is, however, completely on local businesses, along with their local council, to decide whether a BID is something that they wish to take forward.

BIDs will potentially have a significant impact as they will hand a measure of control to businesses themselves. In a defined local

area, businesses will be able to prioritise the work that needs to be done to make their area more appealing, put together a costed bid for that work and vote on whether it should be implemented. It will bring businesses together and give them a vested interest in identifying, costing and delivering improvements that they agree are needed in their local area, with a view to increasing footfall and, thereby, consumer spending in their businesses.

Subject to Executive agreement, I intend to introduce a business improvement districts Bill to the Assembly before the summer recess, and subject to its speed of passage through the Assembly, I hope that the Bill will receive Royal Assent by the end of the year. It will be followed next year by the necessary subordinate legislation and guidance from the Department with the aim of having the statutory framework in place by summer 2013.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his answer. Could it not be argued that a period of recession is not an appropriate time to be developing a BID?

Mr McCausland: On the contrary, this is a good time to develop a business improvement district. It provides an opportunity for businesses to work together to drive down overheads. A BID can make their money go that much further, with larger marketing budgets that can reach out and promote their businesses to more people, both locally and further afield. A BID offers great opportunities for economies of scale.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Will he explain why it has taken so long to put this legislation in place?

Mr McCausland: I took up office in May 2011 and one of my first actions was to review the outcome of the public consultation and decide on the way forward. That involved finalising the policy, briefing the Social Development Committee and seeking Executive agreement to draft the necessary legislation. That drafting is now under way, and I plan to have the primary legislation in place by the end of this year. That will be followed by secondary legislation and guidance from the Department. So, we have been taking this forward as a priority as quickly as possible.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Will the Minister explain what the benefits of business improvement areas are if

no new resources are made available to help businesses grow?

2.45 pm

Mr McCausland: An important point to make at the start of my response is that there is a desire and hunger among the business community in many towns for the introduction of that legislation. Not long ago, I was up with council officials and traders in Ballymena. They have talked about it being brought forward. If you can get the people in Ballymena to spend extra money, obviously that is a good thing. I have been elsewhere to talk to traders and councils, and there is a consensus that it is a good thing. Some areas are more prepared for it than others. Some are just starting out on the journey and others are well advanced. Ballymena is a good example of local initiative: businesses have been moving forward rapidly on this to prepare themselves, as have traders in Belfast. There are advantages, and they are recognised by the traders.

It is not about extra money from government; we are not putting the money in. However, it gives control to local traders on how any additional money that they put into an area will be spent. It is about that sense of local control and the knowledge that local businesses have on what will do the most to improve trade for them.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. What actions will the Minister's Department take to encourage businesses and chambers of commerce, for example in Newry, Keady, Crossmaglen, Armagh and Markethill, to participate in that scheme?

Mr McCausland: I think that, already, right across Northern Ireland, the business community is recognising the value and benefits of the scheme, and that is without it being promoted and sold by the Department. Ours is very much an enabling role, and there is no better way to encourage another town or area to take that up than to see it working and to see the enthusiasm in other areas. Traders speaking to one another is one of the most effective ways to promote this. The general view that I get is that we do not need to drum up enthusiasm; it is already there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

Social Housing: South Down

6. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister for Social Development how many social housing units are currently vacant in the South Down constituency. (AQO 1508/11-15)

Mr McCausland: There are only 29 long-term vacant Housing Executive homes within the Downpatrick, Banbridge and Newry district office areas. Those are vacant, pending further repair, to be used as temporary housing, and some are scheduled for demolition. However, empty housing is a waste of a valuable resource and can blight communities and attract antisocial behaviour. I have seen that all too often in my constituency, so it is a problem of which I am well aware.

In the coming weeks, I will bring forward a new housing strategy, which will include plans on how we will make better use of our existing stock. However, we also need to see what more we can do to make better use of empty homes in the private sector. Some time ago, the Housing Executive undertook research that estimated that there could be up to 40,000 empty homes across Northern Ireland. However, the data underpinning that estimate was not reliable, and despite some initial progress to track down the owners of empty homes, the exercise petered out and results were disappointing. I have asked for a more robust action plan to tackle the wider issue to be produced, and new work in two specific pilot areas is under way to inform that new plan. I see that as an important way to address housing need.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra. Given the dire need for social housing in the South Down area, however, how long do those people have to wait before they get what they deserve?

Mr McCausland: The issue of housing need is recognised right across Northern Ireland and in every constituency. I am sure that the Member will be aware that in the Programme for Government, we identified a target of 8,000 social and affordable homes in the CSR period.

Mrs McKevitt: What is the current level of housing stress in the Newry and Mourne area, particularly in Warrenpoint and Rostrevor, and what action is being taken to address it?

Mr McCausland: I am sure that the Member will recognise that although I have a good memory, it is not good enough to enable me to quote the exact figures for each council area off the top of my head. I will supply the figures to the Member in writing.

The Housing Executive will set out how we are addressing the need in the social housing development programme. We are in the latter part of the year, and I am disappointed at the tardiness of the Housing Executive in bringing that plan to me.

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister very much for his answer. He pre-empted me as regards the social housing development plan 2012-15. We are already three months into 2012 and we have not seen it. How does that tie in with his current Programme for Government targets for social housing? Is there a match between them?

Mr McCausland: I think that the Member will have picked up on the final point in my answer to the previous supplementary question. I would like to see the social housing programme coming forward to me several months, rather than a matter of weeks, before the end of the year. It is an unsatisfactory situation. However, I do not see that that will necessarily affect our Programme for Government target. Our target is there, and we are going for it.

Ms Lewis: Has the Minister's Department had any success in bringing empty homes back into use?

Mr McCausland: At the same time as developing an empty homes action plan for the wider private sector, I have initiated a number of pilot approaches to addressing some of the more difficult empty homes issues in the social housing sector. One thing that we have done is to identify some 100 existing homes that were long-term voids in Antrim, Ballymena, Downpatrick, Enniskillen and lower Oldpark in Belfast, and work has already begun to bring them back into use. I anticipate that this area of work will be ramped up considerably over the next couple of years.

Energy Saving Trust: Funding

7. **Mr Flanagan** asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the removal of funding for the Energy Saving Trust by the

British Government and the impact that this might have on the uptake of energy efficiency grant schemes. (AQO 1509/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department was notified in spring 2011 of the Department of Energy and Climate Change's intention to procure for a wider range of energy efficiency advice services. My officials have been in discussion with the Department of Energy and Climate Change to ensure that any new energy saving advice service meets the needs of householders in Northern Ireland, and this has been factored into the Department of Energy and Climate Change's procurement documents.

I understand that the current service may be replaced by a smaller and more focused Department of Energy and Climate Change energy saving advice service, which will include GB's green deal. My understanding is that the Energy Saving Trust (EST) is involved in the tender process with the Department of Energy and Climate Change.

Energy advice is available from a range other sources, including the warm homes scheme. All persons who make contact with the scheme, whether eligible for measures or not, can receive energy efficiency advice.

Despite the withdrawal of Energy Saving Trust funding and the existing freephone number, Bryson Energy will continue to provide a free impartial energy advice centre telephone and outreach service for householders in Northern Ireland. Bryson Energy will be launching a new freephone contact telephone number for the service in April 2012. My Department, through the Housing Executive, is continuing to provide funding of £95,000 to Bryson Energy to ensure that householders in Northern Ireland will continue to have access to free and impartial energy efficiency advice.

In 2011-12, the Energy Saving Trust provided £350,000 to Bryson Energy for the provision of energy advice. Bryson Energy is considering the impact of the withdrawal of EST funding on its organisation.

Mr Flanagan: I thank the Minister for his extensive answer and for all the detail that he gave. I visited Fermanagh House on Friday to see the service being provided by Bryson Energy, and there was somebody over on behalf of the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of

Employment) Regulations (TUPE) who was trying to save some jobs there.

I want to ask the Minister specifically about the green deal that has been implemented in England and the fact that it will not apply here. Surely something has to be done to ensure that the service that has been provided to date can continue. With a deficit of about £200,000 in funding, there is no way that the same service can be provided.

Mr McCausland: Despite the withdrawal of EST funding and the existing freephone number, Bryson Energy will continue to provide that free, impartial energy advice centre telephone and outreach service for Northern Ireland. I said that it will launch a new freephone contact number in April and that my Department, through the Housing Executive, is funding Bryson Energy, thus ensuring that the service continues.

In 2011-12, the Energy Saving Trust provided us with £350,000. Bryson Energy is considering the impact of the withdrawal of EST funding on its service, and consideration of that is ongoing.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree with the coalition Government's previous statements that energy efficiency measures are the cheapest way of tackling energy issues and climate change?

Mr McCausland: Energy efficiency is extremely important. One of our priorities in Northern Ireland is fuel poverty, and energy inefficiency is undoubtedly one of the three contributing factors to that. That is why we are now investing so much in energy efficiency insulation measures and double glazing in Housing Executive properties. There are other plans to continue, in some form or other, a scheme such as that which we had with the warm homes and boiler replacement schemes. So, we have had a real focus on energy efficiency, and that will continue. It has to be a priority, and it makes sense.

Mr A Maginness: I thank the Minister for his previous answers. Where information on energy to consumers is concerned, it is essential that there is an independent advice service. Is the Minister really satisfied at the current situation? I know that Bryson does a very good job, but could that service not be expanded, thus providing people with an independent service upon which they can rely?

Mr McCausland: I am sure that the Member in no way wants to denigrate or play down the service that Bryson provides, and I know that he is not intending to do that at all. It is very important that that service continues. As to the extent of energy advice provision, I have said that considerations are being given to what happens in the future, and that remains the situation. In fact, we are still considering the matter, as, in fact, is Bryson Energy.

Girdwood Barracks, Belfast

8. **Ms Lo** asked the Minister for Social Development whether there will be sports facilities for use by local schools at the Girdwood Barracks site, Belfast. (AQO 1510/11-15)

Mr McCausland: My Department is reviewing the implementation of the draft master plan for the Girdwood site and the former Crumlin Road jail. Following consultation with OFMDFM and other stakeholders, I aim to announce the way forward as soon as possible. As part of the implementation review, my Department is considering all the uses for the site that were proposed in the draft master plan, including the provision of a sports facility for use by local schools.

I am aware that three north Belfast schools — Belfast Royal Academy, St Malachy's College and St Patrick's — are interested in the development of shared sporting facilities on the Girdwood site, and my Department is engaging with the schools to determine their requirements so that the feasibility of the proposal can be fully considered in the context of all uses for the site.

The development of Girdwood, including any sports facilities, is subject to obtaining the necessary business case, statutory planning and funding approvals.

Ms Lo: I thank the Member for his response, and I am really pleased by it. Can he assure me that when he is progressing the development, the three schools are consulted all the way through and that their needs and desires for shared facilities are taken into account?

Mr McCausland: I know that the Member met at least one of the schools recently. There had been a number of conversations with political parties. I assure the Member that this has been on our agenda for quite some time. I met one of the schools that took a particular interest in the

issue, and it features very much in our thinking. I am very sympathetic to this, and it seems to be something on which we will get widespread community support.

3.00 pm

Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations

1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the marking of 2012 as the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations. (AQO 1518/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister): Mr Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will ask junior Minister Anderson to answer the question.

Ms M Anderson (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. We will mark the European Year of Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations by bringing forward a range of measures, including the possibility of a small grants scheme, proposals for legislation to help to tackle age discrimination and a revised older people's strategy. That will improve older people's quality of life and help to tackle the inequalities that they face.

In May, we will consult on our revised older people's strategy, and, in the autumn, we will consult on the legislation to outlaw discrimination on the ground of age in the provisions of goods, facilities and services. We will take account of the views of the Commissioner for Older People and the Older People's Advisory Panel in developing our proposals, and our consultation will be specifically designed to facilitate older people's participation. The Member was on the OFMDFM Committee when we consulted with older people on the establishment of a commissioner. They are a very active lobby group.

As I mentioned, we are considering the establishment of a small grants scheme for protection to promote active ageing and solidarity between generations. To promote

solidarity between generations, we will look across our children and our older people's responsibility to promote opportunities for people of different generations to learn together and to share experiences. Of course, the views of the Equality Commission, the Commissioner for Older People, the Older People's Advisory Panel, the Children's Commissioner and the third sector will be taken into account in developing a programme of events that will showcase the principles of the year, including an event to mark older people's day in October.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the junior Minister for her answer. The junior Minister is right: there is a very effective lobby from older persons in our community. I work closely with the greater Shankill and north Belfast groups. Does the junior Minister agree that the work done by churches and faith-based organisations across Northern Ireland is invaluable in getting young people and senior citizens together, in bridging that age gap and in building the shared future we want for all people in Northern Ireland?

Ms M Anderson: A number of groups and organisations, including the two that you referred to, are very active, particularly around the revised older people's strategy and the development of the UN principles for older people. I am aware that you work closely with such groups, so you will know that they relate to independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity. All that is drafted to reflect our society. Society will improve, and, without doubt, the strategy will improve life for older people here, with the involvement of all the people who advocate on their behalf, older people themselves and those who care for them.

Ms Ruane: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra a thug sí dúinn. I thank the junior Minister for her answers this far. Will she give an assurance that, if we extend legislation to end discrimination on the basis of age to goods, facilities and services, the current differential treatment, which is beneficial, will not be lost?

Ms M Anderson: That is a very important question. In extending the legislation, we aim to end discrimination on the basis of age or perceived age, which is unjustifiable and, therefore, unfair. We do not intend to end differential treatments that are beneficial and can be objectively justified, such as concessionary fares for older people and for

younger people. We will think very carefully about the scope for and the content of exceptions to anti-discrimination measures in our legislation to make sure that we do not overlook any beneficial practices that should continue. We will subject our proposals to full public consultation that includes older people, older people's representatives and people who care for older people.

Mr Eastwood: Does the junior Minister support the recent kite flying by the Minister for Social Development around the potential removal of the free travel scheme for pensioners?

Ms M Anderson: The Executive have already put out a position with regard to whether that would be removed or not. Jonathan Bell, the other junior Minister, and I work closely with the older people's sector. We have been engaging with the sector on a number of matters. One of the events that we attended was a dinner at which we found that people, particularly those in the higher echelons of society and on very high wages, said that they would like to make a contribution. However, I think that the Executive have been very clear that such concessions should be given to older people and will not be removed.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I should have advised Members earlier that question 9 and question 11 have been withdrawn and require a written answer.

Northern Ireland Peace Monitoring Report

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the Northern Ireland peace monitoring report. (AQO 1519/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: We have already come a long way as a society. The collective effort at a political, community and individual level must be commended. The report highlights the stability of the political institutions and the decrease in violence. We are heartened by that finding and the indication that a new, confident urban culture has developed. We will want to see that enhanced as our community continues to move forward. However, we know that there is still work to do. The publication of this report underlines where there continue to be challenges for us as a society. We are

committed to addressing the issues, regardless of how complex or challenging they may be.

The First Minister and I remain committed to building a united and shared society. For us to achieve that vision, we must address the division that continues to mar many areas in our community, tackle the segregation that has enabled our people to live often separate lives for too long and encourage and nurture an environment in which cultural diversity is celebrated and embraced. We believe that the finalised cohesion, sharing and integration strategy will be an important building block for tackling those issues. This report will be a valuable reference for the continued considerations of the cross-party working group.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the deputy First Minister for his response. The report shows that a possible 90% segregation in schools and housing continues to exist. How does that reflect on his Department's ability, to date, to deliver a united community? What specific actions does he think are needed in the CSI strategy to deliver more integrated schools and neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland?

Mr M McGuinness: The cross-party working group on this issue has met weekly since, I think, September of last year. That is important work. It is clear from the reports that the First Minister and I regularly receive that progress has been made. All the issues are being tackled in a serious way. We want to see the conclusion of those deliberations. The CSI working group is dealing comprehensively with all the issues that have been neuralgic for us in recent times.

The First Minister and I have made it absolutely clear that we consider the further development of the working group established under the tutelage of the Minister of Education, John O'Dowd, to be very important in tackling the issue of how we can intensify sharing in education. One project that he and I are keen to see delivered is the development of the Lisanelly and St Lucia project in Omagh in County Tyrone. That is a very important flagship project for us as an Executive. There are real opportunities to show everybody in the education system in particular that the whole issue of sharing is very important for quite a number of reasons, not least economic reasons and the need to ensure that our young people communicate with each other on the basis of respect. That is one example of how we can go

forward. There are many other examples, but obviously we want to see the outworking of the report from the working group, and the Member who has just spoken is a member of that group. The sooner that work is completed, the better, and the sooner we can —

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

Mr M McGuinness: — start to tackle those very difficult issues.

Mr Campbell: The deputy First Minister will be aware of the 10 key points in the report, two of which are linked. One refers to a strategy for reconciliation and one to a solution to deal with the past. Given that those two things are key to the future, does he agree that the next time he or anyone else who was involved in terror or violence in the past is asked to own up to their part in it, they should do that, rather than plead the fifth amendment, as he did during the Saville inquiry?

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister may or may not wish to answer that question.

Mr M McGuinness: I will answer the question. Obviously, it has been the policy of the Member who asked the question to be as negative as he can, and that is something that I have come to terms with. It says more about him than about me. I have been very much involved in the work of peace and reconciliation. I would like to think that I have put my life on the line for the peace process over recent times on quite a number of occasions and would do so again tomorrow without any hesitation whatsoever. I work very positively and constructively with the First Minister and with many other people in society, including the community and voluntary sector. I also work with all the Churches to ensure that we continue to move forward. The past has been a very dark place for us all, and no solution has yet been found by anybody, not least the Member, to deal with that situation. However, I am very focused on the future and how I can contribute to building a better future for our young people.

Mr W Clarke: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The report concludes that we are still a very divided society. How effective has community relations funding been over the past 20 years in tackling division?

Mr M McGuinness: I well understand the Member's point, and we will look into that

question further. Obviously, we need an audit of the effectiveness of community relations funding, given the conclusions of the report. In my view, the report asks some fundamental questions about how government uses resources to deliver for our communities. It is clear that we need to do things differently to achieve better outcomes for our communities. We cannot sustain a situation where public money is not making an impact where it is needed most. Community relations funding should deliver in a way that is measurable and likely to achieve an outcome that benefits us all. That is clearly not the case, it seems, at present. Those who currently deliver community relations work on behalf of government need to ask themselves whether the current models are the best fit for our society. The CSI working group will look at the delivery of community relations funding during discussions on that programme.

Cohesion, Sharing and Integration

3. **Mr McMullan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the programme for cohesion, sharing and integration, including the expected date of completion. (AQO 1520/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The First Minister and I are committed to providing leadership on improving good relations in our society. We know that the commitment to building a better future is shared right across our community. That was highlighted through the significant response that the Department received to the public consultation on the draft programme for cohesion, sharing and integration. That commitment is also shared across all five parties in the Executive. The Programme for Government, which the Assembly is being asked to endorse, underlines that by giving a firm commitment to build a united and shared society. We recognise that the key building block for achieving that will be the finalised cohesion, sharing and integration strategy.

The cross-party working group has been working intensively since September last year. It continues to meet weekly, and it has reached an advanced stage in its considerations. The group aims to complete its work and produce a final strategy and high-level action plan shortly. We recognise the importance of producing a strategy that will provide the strategic framework for us to continue to drive forward

real and meaningful change right across our community, and we want to see that work reach a conclusion as soon as possible. However, we also recognise the importance of reaching agreement on the many complex issues that the strategy will seek to address.

3.15 pm

Mr McMullan: I thank the deputy First Minister for his very detailed response. Will he update us on how flags are dealt with in the CSI strategy?

Mr M McGuinness: The flags protocol working group was reconvened at the request of the First Minister and me and the cross-party working group on CSI. It has met twice since December. The working group consists of representatives from other relevant Departments, including the Department of Justice, DSD and DRD, as well as representatives from local government, the Housing Executive, the PSNI, the Equality Commission, the Community Relations Council and Queen's University.

The next step for the group will be to consider a discussion paper on background and context, the impacts of flag flying, the proposed mechanism for implementation, the delivery of a new flags framework, the communication mechanism and community engagement options. The intention is that, following the agreement of a revised framework, the document will form part of the monitoring and implementation arrangements of the CSI strategy.

Mr Cree: Does the deputy First Minister agree that the overriding factor for the completion of the CSI document is not the timescale but the quality of the document?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes. I agree absolutely.

Mrs D Kelly: The deputy First Minister spoke about a united and shared society in his previous answers. Does he agree that the development of the former Girdwood Barracks site could be a flagship project for building a shared future and could help meet the many needs of people who have been on a housing waiting list for a very long time?

Mr M McGuinness: I absolutely understand the pressures on the housing sector, and I know that the issue has been under discussion between community groups in north Belfast and the Department for Social Development. It is a matter for the Department for Social Development, but I absolutely agree that it is

important that we come to a conclusion sooner rather than later.

Social Investment Fund: Drug Addiction

4. **Ms P Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the social investment fund will address drug addiction and other systemic problems in areas of social deprivation. (AQO 1521/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: The strategic objectives of the social investment fund are to support communities in building pathways to employment, tackle the systemic issues linked to deprivation, increase community services and address dereliction. Delivery is intended to be through the development and delivery of strategic area plans, which will be co-ordinated by and drawn from across the relevant investment zone and steering groups comprising community and voluntary, business, political and statutory representatives.

Drug addiction, substance abuse and other such problems may be considered under the objective focused on tackling the systemic issues linked to deprivation. It will be for communities working in partnership with government, the statutory sector and the voluntary and community sector to identify, prioritise and evidence need and propose associated interventions for inclusion in their area plans.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer, in which he spoke about area plans. Given the specific difficulties around social deprivation in north Belfast, has any consideration been given to developing a strategic plan for that area and other areas like it?

Mr M McGuinness: Obviously, we made it clear from the beginning that the whole purpose of the social investment fund is to empower local communities. It is very important in contributing to how we move forward through the investment in the social investment fund that local communities decide what their priorities are. In the context of this particular fund, they need to put in place a strategy that meets the needs that they think are essential to the local community. It is important that empowerment takes place. This is not about us deciding how the people of north Belfast should deal with the fund; this is us telling the people of north Belfast to identify the key issues. We will then go as far as we can to support them. The

development of a strategy is in the hands of the local people.

Mr A Maskey: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Given that a number of areas have expressed concern that they are not within the zones earmarked for SIF support, are there any plans to revisit those zones to include areas with high-level deprivation that may adjoin them?

Mr M McGuinness: We are aware that the composition of investment zones is an issue that featured strongly during the consultation period. In setting out the proposed investment zones, we always intended that they would be flexible. Our intention has always been to ensure that we target resources at the areas in greatest objective need. Where areas are able to demonstrate objective need, we will ensure that they are considered for access to resources. However, I want to make it clear that not every area in each zone will receive funding. Funding will be allocated only in areas where objective need can be identified. We are carefully considering the views put forward in respect of the zones to see how they might best be redrawn to address the concerns expressed during the consultation.

Mr McCarthy: The deputy First Minister may or may not be aware that there is a very active inter-church group working in north Belfast. It is crying out for funding to provide —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can we have a question, please?

Mr McCarthy: — a centre for the treatment of alcohol and substance abuse, like the one in County Kilkenny. Would the deputy First Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member ask his question, please?

Mr McCarthy: — encourage that group to look for funding to provide such a centre?

Mr M McGuinness: Yes, I would. I pay tribute to all those from the churches who make a very positive contribution in communities such as north Belfast. Any ideas that emerge will be seriously considered and will no doubt be funded on the basis of merit. Again, it comes back to the issue of empowering the local community. I have no doubt whatsoever that the church group of which you speak is integrated in the local community, and I expect that its project will receive due consideration.

OFMDFM: Freedom of Information Requests

5. **Mr Elliott** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an assessment of their Department's performance in meeting freedom of information requests within the 20-working-day deadline. (AQO 1522/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: OFMDFM has received 897 freedom of information requests since the legislation was fully implemented in January 2005. Validated figures for the period 2005-2010 show that 83% of requests were answered within the 20-working-day deadline. A further 5% of requests were answered within permitted time extensions to allow for consideration of the balance of public interest. Overall, 88% of requests were answered on time.

Mr Elliott: I thank the deputy First Minister for his answer. Those figures differ from the ones in the Information Commissioner's report. Has the Information Commissioner made any references to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on the matter?

Mr M McGuinness: I think that everybody knows and fully understands that, although the information people whom we are in touch with have responsibility for all this, the First Minister and I are ultimately responsible for the information entrusted to our Department and for ensuring that such information is protected, disclosed and reused appropriately. Indeed, we have a clear and vested interest in information that concerns the content and presentation of our policies. Inevitably, we become involved in the consideration of requests that concern the formulation of government policy or the effect of conduct on public affairs. Indeed, as qualified persons under section 36 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, which concerns the effective conduct of public affairs, Ministers have a statutory duty to determine whether or not information should be exempt from disclosure.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Can the deputy First Minister provide a more recent update on the performance in meeting FOI requests?

Mr M McGuinness: Our Department's performance compares favourably with that of other jurisdictions. In Wales, the Government answered 75% of requests on time in 2010, while the Scottish Government answered 84% on time in the same year. The Whitehall

Departments answered 84% of requests on time for the period 2008-2010.

Mr I McCrea: The deputy First Minister has referred to the disproportionate use of freedom of information requests and the need to ensure that such requests are made for good reason rather than any reason. Does he have a view on whether it is a good use of legislation and on whether the whole issue of freedom of information requests should be reviewed?

Mr M McGuinness: Freedom of information has existed for some time. In the aftermath of his stint in Downing Street, Tony Blair cited it as one of the most regrettable decisions that he ever made. However, it exists, and we have to abide by its rules and regulations. There is absolutely no doubt that freedom of information allows people to abuse their access to information. That is not confined to people outside the House: some people in the House leave me wondering whether they do anything other than write to Departments for information that, on many occasions, is absolutely worthless.

Equality Commission and Human Rights Commission: Merger

6. **Mr McCallister** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what consideration they have given to merging the Equality Commission and the Human Rights Commission. (AQO 1523/11-15)

Mr M McGuinness: With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Anderson to answer the question.

Ms M Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agat. The Equality Commission is an arm's-length body sponsored by OFMDFM, and the Human Rights Commission is sponsored by the NIO. There are no plans to merge the two bodies. Our office has undertaken extensive work to collocate a range of our arm's-length bodies through which we will provide a more effective service to the public and achieve financial savings estimated by officials to be up to £1.6 million by 2015.

On a wider point, the Executive Budget review group has been taking forward a review of arm's-length bodies throughout all Departments with the objective of assessing whether individual bodies might be abolished, absorbed into parent Departments or merged with another body, with resulting efficiencies and savings. The

outcome of the central analysis of data provided by Departments has recently been given to Ministers for further consideration of the status of the bodies that they sponsor.

Mr McCallister: I am grateful to the junior Minister for her reply. Can she assure the House that all bodies will be looked at and kept in place only if they are proven to give valuable service to people? Can she also highlight a timescale for decisions on those bodies?

Ms M Anderson: As I said, the Executive have agreed criteria for the review of arm's-length bodies that is being carried out by the Budget review group. An analysis of that information is being completed centrally by OFMDFM and Department of Finance and Personnel officials. The Budget review group recently considered a progress report. As I stated in my substantive answer, all Ministers, including the Minister from the Member's party, are being invited to consider the implications of the central analysis of their Department's bodies. As soon as Ministers come back to us with that consideration, that will be taken forward.

Mr A Maginness: I agree that there should be no merger of the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission. The Human Rights Commission was established under the Good Friday Agreement. Can the Minister assure the House that that separation will be maintained, although collocation —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I believe that we have had a question; perhaps, even, a number of questions. Thank you.

Ms M Anderson: Under the NI Act 1998, the Human Rights Commission and the observance and implementation of obligations under the human rights convention are excepted matters. The commission is sponsored and funded by NIO; its commissioners are appointed by the Secretary of State. Under the same Act, the Equality Commission is a reserved matter. Its commissioners are appointed by the Secretary of State, although that commission is sponsored and funded by OFMDFM. The Equality Commission has a statutory remit to challenge discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity through anti-discrimination statutes. The commission's work in general undoubtedly contributes to a reduction in discrimination.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Does the Minister agree

that there are gaps in human rights protection for older people?

Ms M Anderson: Yes. Undoubtedly, there are gaps in human rights protection for older people. The Human Rights Commission has just published a report entitled 'In Defence of Dignity', which found that current law and regulations fall short in their ability to protect older people, particularly in nursing homes. The need to streamline legislation to provide robust protection and safeguards for older people has never been more clearly needed than in the case highlighted by DUP MP Jeffrey Donaldson of a Mrs McCluskey, whose carer admitted to abuse of the 70-year-old Alzheimer's sufferer.

However, the legislation is somewhat fragmented and is spread across countless Bills, making almost a jumble of protections that are easily confused or lost. As some have commented, confused law is, at times, no law at all.

3.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Programme for Government

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government 2011-15 agreed by the Executive. — [Mr P Robinson (The First Minister).]

Mr G Robinson: First, I commend everyone who has been involved in producing the Programme for Government. It must have been a difficult and challenging task. However, the task has been met, and we, as a government, need to make sure that we deliver for all our people. With the loss of £4 billion from the Executive's Budget, the Finance Minister, in particular, has had a difficult role. I especially congratulate him for ensuring that the Programme for Government will target funding to essential areas in our Province.

In November, the First Minister said:

"Our job is not to stand back and observe but to use the powers and resources at our disposal to make a difference." — [Official Report, Vol 68, No 7, p382, col 1].

The Programme for Government matches his words. Despite the fact that there are fewer monetary resources, only a growing and vibrant economy will provide the people of Northern Ireland with an opportunity to use their skills and to create a wealthier and happier future for everyone here.

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

Importantly, the Programme for Government focuses on Northern Ireland's infrastructure. That focus includes a relaying of the Londonderry to Coleraine rail link, major road-building programmes and investment in our most precious asset — our young people. The one disappointment that I have is the omission of the Dungiven bypass and the upgrade of the A26. Those two schemes are essential from a health and road safety point of view. I must stress the importance of ensuring that our young people have the necessary skills to gain employment now and in the future. Therefore, the investment in our young people is a great investment in Northern Ireland's future.

In November, the First Minister said:

“The reality is that we cannot simply react passively to world events as they happen. We need to proactively seek out the opportunities for Northern Ireland to become a leading light in the recovery that will inevitably follow the bad times.” — [Official Report, Vol 68, No 7, p384, col 1].

The Programme for Government is a proactive response to the current economic situation. The First Minister pointed out how seeking inward investment without the road, the rail, and, most importantly, the workforce infrastructure would damage Northern Ireland’s appeal to future investors.

I welcome the Executive’s concentration on assisting small and medium-sized businesses through keeping the regional rate rise consistent with the rate of inflation and the introduction of a loan fund to help with cash flows. My party and I hope that the Assembly sees that although we need foreign investment to help to develop our economy, we have not and will not overlook our indigenous small and medium-sized businesses, which are the bedrock of our economy. It is important that non-contentious planning applications with the potential for major job creation are given special consideration and are granted inside six months. That will be yet another aid in the development of companies.

When the power to set air passenger duty is devolved, I welcome the plan to eliminate air passenger duty on long-haul flights. That can only be a boost to the tourism and business sectors and will, for example, help to bring visitors to the Titanic Quarter, the new Bushmills golf course and the new Giant’s Causeway visitor centre.

Through the measures in the Programme for Government, its aim is to create a wealthier Northern Ireland, with many more people in employment. That will have the effect of reducing the numbers of those who are classed as living in poverty or suffering from fuel poverty. Despite the Budget being decimated by £4 billion, the Executive’s proposals show their commitment to Northern Ireland and the future of its people. I urge the Assembly to support the motion, which, in my mind, will keep Northern Ireland moving forward.

Ms Lo (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Environment): In order to provide the

Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with a comprehensive response to the Programme for Government consultation, the Committee for the Environment, on 24 November 2011, agreed to invite stakeholders to submit comments. Stakeholders were encouraged to focus their responses on perceived gaps in the draft Programme for Government, milestones and outputs, and the monitoring process. Twenty-one organisations responded, and on 12 January 2012, the Committee hosted a stakeholder event.

The aim of the evidence session was to provide stakeholders with a platform to air their concerns and issues and, ultimately, to inform the Committee’s formal response. In general, although stakeholders welcomed the fact that a draft Programme for Government had been produced, most felt that the language used in it was vague and that it lacked vision. When it came to perceived gaps, milestones and monitoring, stakeholders highlighted a number of more specific concerns.

Having considered those concerns, the Committee made a number of recommendations. Many of the perceived gaps identified by stakeholders and endorsed by the Committee related to waste. The Committee recommends that targets for non-domestic waste, as well as for domestic waste, should be included in the Programme for Government. Although targets for domestic waste are good, the Committee believes that it is essential that there are also targets to work towards reducing industrial waste. More than four times as much waste is generated by industry than by ordinary households, yet the sole focus of the draft Programme for Government in relation to waste appeared to be on domestic waste.

The Committee also wanted to see measures that encourage the prevention and reuse of waste, as well as those for recycling. That would ensure that the Programme for Government reflects the universal waste hierarchy of reduce, reuse and recycle. Several stakeholders also suggested that the Programme for Government should recognise Northern Ireland’s urgent need for waste management infrastructure. The Committee agreed that in order to ensure that we meet our commitment to reducing the amount of waste going to landfill, it would be beneficial to have a target for the provision of waste infrastructure.

Moving on from waste, the Committee felt that the Programme for Government should have included more detail about the local government reform process. This is such a significant change that there should be more information about how it will happen, how it will be funded and what practical steps will be taken to ensure the seamless transfer of functions from central government to local councils. On balance, the Committee welcomed the commitment to faster planning decisions that could lead to job creation and economic development. However, the Committee stressed that that should not be to the detriment of social and environmental considerations.

Indeed, although sustainability is listed as an underlying principle of the Programme for Government, the Committee recommended that greater emphasis should be placed on sustainability, with specific actions aimed at promoting opportunities for sustainable approaches such as those offered by the green new deal. The Committee recommended that the Programme for Government should highlight the implications of climate change and identified opportunities to address the issue through the introduction of new policies. For example, the introduction of a food security strategy that focuses on the benefits of greater use of locally produced food.

I will move on to milestones. In general, the Committee felt that the milestones in the draft Programme for Government were not sufficiently detailed or challenging. In its response to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Committee for the Environment strongly recommended the introduction of SMART — specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound — targets to enable progress and success to be measured.

However, the Committee is mindful that the programme is an overarching document and, as such, should not be laden with details of how objectives should be achieved. Instead, members were keen to see a requirement for each Department to produce a detailed action plan that includes challenging targets and timelines on how and when they will deliver their commitments in the programme.

With regard to monitoring, the Committee has ongoing concerns about the current approach of self-reporting that is used by Departments for assessing the public service agreements

and suggested that Assembly Committees should have a more clearly recognised role in monitoring and sanctioning departmental progress. Therefore, the Committee cautiously welcomes the proposed monitoring and reporting arrangements for the new programme that the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) recently outlined to the Finance and Personnel Committee. The initial reaction of the Committee is that the suggested departmental delivery plans echo the Committee's recommendations, particularly if they succeed in identifying the main actions that are to be taken to achieve outputs and objectives, associated resource requirements, clear lines of responsibility, timescales and SMART targets, along with a requirement for quarterly delivery reporting to the Assembly.

We have now had a chance, albeit brief, to see the final programme, and I welcome the inclusion of a target date and additional measures to halt the loss of biodiversity. The inclusion of a more specific commitment for increasing household recycling and composting to 45% by 2015 is also welcome, although I remain disappointed that there are still no measures for industrial waste.

Another disappointment is that there has been no change to the commitment for RPA. The focus remains on numbers, which makes it even more important that the Department produces a detailed action plan that clearly identifies the processes that are going to take place and when. It also emphasises the need for good communication with councils and training for staff and councillors. A lot more work needs to be done, and we need the councils to be on board with that work.

Those issues apart, the Environment Committee welcomes, subject to proper resources, the priorities in the programme relating to the inclusion of social clauses in all public procurement contracts and the target for 90% of large-scale planning decisions to be made within six months. We welcome the target for the continued reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by a minimum of 35% against 1990 levels by 2025, greater protection and enhancement of the environment and a reduction in the environmental impact from waste. The Committee also endorses the overarching aim of the programme to build a vibrant economy that can transform our society by dealing with deprivation and poverty. However,

the Committee believes that that focus on the economy should be actioned in ways that protect and enhance the environment and use resources as effectively and sustainably as possible. Before closing, I thank the stakeholders that informed the Committee's response, and on behalf of the Environment Committee, I support the motion.

In my remaining minute or so, I will speak as the Alliance Party's spokesperson on the environment. Although we endorse the comments from the Environment Committee, I will highlight a number of other issues that are of concern to us. First, the Programme for Government contains no mention of any proposals to look at establishing national parks, although it was mentioned in the economic strategy as a way of promoting tourism.

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

3.45 pm

Ms Lo: We are disappointed that the word "marine" is mentioned only twice.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Your time is up.

Ms Lo: We know that the Marine Bill is going through the Assembly but it does not include a marine management organisation.

Mr Kinahan: As ever, I am pleased to speak to the motion, and like my colleague, I give an overarching welcome to the Programme for Government, even though it comes in the wrong order in that it is before the Budget rather than after it. We should perhaps develop that in future so that it appears after the Budget and works itself properly through party manifestos so that we get our government in the right order.

I do not want to be negative all the time. The Programme for Government sets out a lot of intentions, many of which we should all welcome. A great deal of it does seem to be motherhood and apple pie, but there is much to praise. I am pleased that it includes job targets, extra spend on health and many other issues. However, it is often too vague with too few targets and timelines. The public want things to happen quickly and they want to be included. We have to make sure that the pressure is kept up.

I still see myself as a new boy to politics, and if there is one observation that I can make, it is how slow we are at doing things. In the previous

mandate, when I was on the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I asked in January about the end date for a particular document. I was told that an interim document would be brought back in March. I pointed out that the mandate was due to end in March, so we had better have the document a week earlier. My colleague said that a week earlier made no difference because it would still be only an interim document. I am sure that that puts it back on the shelf. We have to start thinking about getting timelines in place and making things happen.

Another major example is the cohesion, sharing and integration strategy, which I long to see in place. However, we still do not seem to have a framework on how we put it into action on the ground. Is there a matrix? Do we have to have talks, or even talks about talks, in each area? The strategy needs leadership on the ground, and the Assembly has to start to find ways to turn strategies into actions. In my brief time as a councillor, the major issue of gatekeepers, whether political or in local groups, needed to be tackled because a way had to be found to get local people to feel that they could join any group, have their say and, if necessary, lead into the future.

As the Ulster Unionist environment spokesman, I wish to speak about the environment. The Programme for Government mentions the green economy, yet we hear nothing about the green new deal. We must find a way to get more green issues into the actions that I assume will be put in place through the Programme for Government. If we look at the future of rivers, marine, heritage and other issues, the only funding that is in place is the carrier bag tax. We need to look at the resources and find the right way to take forward the green new deal and to get it in place.

On Thursday last week, the Environment Committee was briefed on ecosystems and services. We need to find a way to get all the environmental language taken on and put in place through every single departmental decision. That does not happen at the moment. I am disappointed that in the Programme for Government, marine planning did not include a marine management organisation. We want to see one. We cannot simply have a joint Assembly group that hopes to be able to have more influence. We must have a body that

drives marine planning forward; otherwise, it will never happen.

It is good to see recycling targets of 45%. However, that is all. We should be looking at better recycling targets and better ways to recycle. I was a councillor on Antrim Borough Council, which is on 42%, so we need to set good, challenging and achievable targets for every council.

We need to know the future of the three waste companies. Is that the way forward? Does the Programme for Government want us to go that way? How does it balance with the private sector? How will we get the mix right? I want the Programme for Government to drive whatever is the right way forward.

Climate change is hardly touched on in the Programme for Government. It states:

“To continue to project at least a 35% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 based on 1990 baseline”,

What does it mean by “project”? It just says that we will look at the targets rather than try to achieve them. We have to find a way forward. We all know, from watching television and everything else, that global warming is happening; whether man-made or not, we must take actions. The Programme for Government is very weak on getting any actions taken that will tackle climate change. If you think that the sea is warming and our fish stocks are dying, that is vital to all of us. If you look at the weather we have had in the past few years, with the cold spell last year and the wet spell this year, which destroyed our potato harvest, global warming is something that we have to take on board. We must not shy away from the environment; it must be part of every decision rather than just blanked out of the side.

Another matter that I want to see, which Anna Lo touched on, is the reorganisation of councils. It is excellent to see it in the Programme for Government, but we have to make sure that it happens properly. We have to see a way in which it works for all of us. Are the Executive behind it? Are they really going to push for the reorganisation of councils? Are all the MLAs in here behind pushing for that, and are the councillors themselves? We have to put it across that change will happen in councils and that we all have to drive it. It was my party colleague, Sam Foster, who, many years ago, proposed the changes in local government. We

have to put in place the right resources and make sure that we give them the right powers.

Planning is part of that, and it is mentioned in the Programme for Government, but will that planning bring the jobs and the changes that will lead to future jobs for all of us? Where has coterminosity gone? It is a ghastly but important word. We wanted everything working together. We have Westminster, Assembly and council boundary changes coming; yet, at the same time, there are different boundaries for the police and for education. We have to see that driven properly, but the Programme for Government gives me no confidence that that will happen. Do we have a sensible way forward? Logic still says 15 or, if Westminster reduces by two seats, 14. That is the Ulster Unionist Party policy.

Change must happen, and it must happen quickly; we will not get in the way of it. However, we must keep looking at it and reviewing it so that we get it working best within the boundaries. A huge concern for us is the fact that Belfast may be reworked within the boundaries so that it no longer remains unionist. Is that really what we want? Do we want Belfast, our capital, our heart, to become a nationalist-run capital? I do not believe that that is something that we want to tie ourselves to for the future. *[Interruption.]* It is interesting to listen to comments. We have to think it through. That also means that we would be getting a Belfast run by a Marxist or communist party if we let it go that way. I am not against socialism, but I am against the despotic form of it that has worked nowhere in the world. I do not think that the electorate would want that.

We must remember that government must be carried out where it can best be delivered for the people, and I do not feel that that is necessarily what we are putting in place. Councils need resources and funding, and we must find a way of giving them that funding —

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

Mr Kinahan: — whether that be loans or bonds. We must look at how we reorganise our government properly. That will be our big test.

Mr Wells: The greatest achievement of the previous Programme for Government and Assembly was the fact that we sustained ourselves and kept democracy alive in Northern

Ireland. We overcame many challenges during that period, and we now have a form of settled and relatively stable democracy in this part of the United Kingdom. The public will expect this Programme for Government to deliver something radically improved on that in the next period. People out there expect devolution to make a difference and an improvement. This document, therefore, will be a challenge to us all; we have to deliver. In four years' time, we have to say to the public that Northern Ireland is a better place as a result of 108 MLAs and an Executive. If we cannot prove that, I am afraid that we will leave ourselves wide open to ridicule.

I can understand the thought processes behind what happened with the document. Each Department was to propose various policy strategies that they saw as important and that should be put into the PFG. Presumably, the special advisers got around tables and there was a bargaining exercise about what should go in and what should not, and then that was referred up to Ministers. It seems that, basically, every Department has had its allocation of policies, strategies and targets. However, health is, of course, by far and away the most important Department in expenditure and employment terms, with 70,000 full-time equivalents in Northern Ireland. Therefore, 40% of the Budget is allocated to health. It is dominant in the Budget, and it should be the same for the Programme for Government. However, I notice that that fact is not reflected in the strategies and policies outlined. I can understand why, but the Health Committee, when it looked at the issue, was not particularly happy. Let us be honest: the budget for the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure is so small that you could put it in the broom cupboard of the Health Department. We are talking about a totally different league of expenditure and importance. Yet, when you look at the document, you would think that all Departments were equal. They are not. I would like to think that in future Programmes for Government, we can give more emphasis to the health agenda. It is so critical.

I strongly welcome, however, the health policies that are outlined in the Programme for Government. I am particularly keen on the emphasis on the public health agenda. Is this perhaps our opportunity in Northern Ireland to tackle the lifestyle choices that cause so many problems in our health service? I understand that 'The Belfast Telegraph' had at least one if

not two reporters placed at various A&Es over the past weekend. They are about to do an exposé of the impact of the abuse of alcohol on accident and emergency departments in hospitals throughout Northern Ireland. We know, for instance, that alcohol is estimated to cost the Northern Ireland exchequer £800 million a year. That, of course, affects not just the Health Department; it affects the Department of Justice, the Department for Social Development, etc. If we could solve that problem, that amount of money would, effectively, solve our economic difficulties. What would an extra £800 million not achieve in all Departments? It would be a windfall of dynamic proportions.

I am delighted that we have a commitment in the Programme for Government to increase spending on public health annually as a proportion of the overall Budget. We are placing far more emphasis on preventing people getting to the clinic, GP or hospital rather than curing them once they arrive there. That has to be a good thing. Green shoots are already appearing. Last Thursday, we had a ban on the use of tobacco-vending machines. That is a good move; it will prevent many young people accessing tobacco in a way that cannot be controlled. We have greater control over the use of sunbeds. We are bringing in a ban on the point-of-sale display of tobacco products. In other words, you will no longer go to a newsagent or supermarket and have a massive display promoting tobacco facing you at the till.

That is good news. We are moving. However, I would like to think that the period of this Programme for Government will be the era in which we will see perhaps the most important public health change in Northern Ireland, and that is control over the abuse of alcohol.

4.00 pm

There have been promising indications that we are moving to the minimum pricing of alcohol in the Province. If that happens, it has to be extremely welcome. There is absolutely no doubt that there is something perverse about a society where mass-produced alcohol can be sold at a lower price than bottled water. That is just crazy. In every town and village in Northern Ireland, we all see examples of young people, often teenagers, going into supermarkets on a Friday or Saturday night, buying ridiculously cheap alcohol, getting tanked up — I think that is the phrase — and then going to a

pub or club, where they drink heavy alcohol, such as vodka and so on. By the end of the Programme for Government, we must have a policy that prevents that. Therefore, I welcome the commitment by the Department for Social Development, the Department of Health and the DOE to prevent that. I would like to think that we will see delivery on that issue during this programme. If we do not, we will completely overload many aspects of our health service. I do not want to spike the guns of our local newspapers, but I suspect that, when that story is revealed, it will shock the nation to see what goes on in hospitals throughout the Province on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights. I am aware of one hospital that has to employ four security guards on a Saturday night, simply to cope with the violence and disruption caused by those who are the worse for wear. That cannot be allowed to continue, or our health service will become completely overwhelmed and we will not be able to attract junior doctors and consultants to work weekend shifts.

I am also pleased that the Programme for Government has allocated £7.2 million to tackle obesity. Indeed, Minister Poots launched the obesity strategy in Craigavon on Friday. That is a step in the right direction: if the stats on alcohol are scary, the stats on obesity are frightening. The Health Committee held an inquiry into obesity two years ago which concluded that, if the nettle of obesity is not grasped and dealt with, it will overwhelm the health service in two decades. Simply put, no matter how many resources we have, we will not be able to tackle the problems caused by obesity, which are mainly, of course, type 2 diabetes and increases in coronary heart disease and some cancers. Therefore, we have to get this right, and it is incredibly encouraging that the Department has decided to give additional funding. Far too many people in the Province, particularly children, are obese, and we are storing up huge problems for ourselves.

Allied with that — I mentioned the steps being taken to prevent the display and vending of tobacco products — each year, in Northern Ireland, 2,300 people die often horribly painful and lingering deaths as a result of tobacco abuse. We must use this Programme for Government to tackle that issue. These are utterly needless deaths of people hooked on an addictive substance that is one of the most dangerous on the planet. I equally suspect that, unless we do something about that, we

will store up further trouble for ourselves. The warning signs are there. It is clear that the Department is grasping them, but I just hope that it will be backed by the resolve of the House and that there will not be cries of “nanny state”. People in Northern Ireland have the freedom of the fox in the chicken run. They have the freedom to indulge in life-threatening activities. The problem is that the Assembly and the Executive also have the freedom to pick up the vast tab to deal with the consequences of those freedoms. That is paid not by those involved in these activities but by society as a whole. Let us be clear: we must start to make it much more difficult to access the products that cause such difficulties.

On a slightly different issue, we face huge challenges on Bamford. The new legislation arising from Bamford will be brought through in this Programme for Government. Indeed, it is highlighted as one of the main targets. That will probably be the largest piece of legislation that the current Assembly will see. It will be hugely demanding and difficult for the Committee, the Executive and the Assembly to see it through safely. However, this is our once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure that service provision and the protection of those with mental health difficulties are state of the art and that we have the leading strategy in western Europe. We must grasp the opportunity. Sadly, I was in the Assembly in 1983 when the last legislation went through, and here we are, all these years later, and another generation has passed. We must grasp the opportunity and ensure that people with mental illness, which tends to be the Cinderella aspect of the health service, have the best possible provision, treatment and protection in the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close? You have done; thank you.

Mr Flanagan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I am delighted to be here to contribute to the debate, particularly as I was unable to be here for the debate on the draft Programme for Government in November 2011. At that time, I was involved in intense negotiations, not with other political parties or lobby groups but with a private clamper in south Belfast who ruined my day and cost me £85. Perhaps the deputy First Minister will take that issue back to the Executive and try to get some progress on the regulation of private clampers.

The Programme for Government clearly outlines where the Executive's priorities lie over the next few years, and it sets out clearly the targets that lie ahead. Since 2007, the Executive and Assembly have largely been judged on their stability. However, since the last election, expectations have been raised, rightly so, among our citizens. As one of those citizens, I have similarly high expectations: not that we can all — just about — sit in the same room and talk to each other but that we are all concentrated on the same objective of improving the lives of all the people we represent. So, we will not be judged on our ability to continue to come here, on how well strategies can be drafted or on how well we can write plans or consultation documents. The First Minister said that in his opening contribution. Instead, we will be judged on our delivery against the targets that have been set. All 108 MLAs in the House, particularly those who sit on the Executive, will be judged on their ability to deliver for all our people, and this Programme for Government is a positive outlook on where we need to be and, most importantly, how we get there. So, I look forward to seeing the detail of this programme being put in place and people reaping tangible benefits from it through the creation of additional jobs, the attraction of additional tourists, a reduction in energy prices, further improvements to our education system or measures such as the installation of double-glazed windows. Citizens need to see delivery on the ground. People understand statistics and percentages perfectly well, but making a difference to their daily lives is the challenge that lies ahead for each and every one of us.

As Sinn Féin spokesperson for enterprise, trade and investment, I will now cover a number of the key aspects that apply to that Department. Huge targets have been set for the promotion of jobs, and Invest NI must recognise that indigenous businesses must be our priority in job creation and in growing a sustainable private sector that is focused not only on growing exports but on reducing dependence on imported goods. It is very positive to see figures broken down in the Programme for Government on how Invest NI has been told to give out grants. Targets have been set, and it is particularly positive to see that indigenous businesses make up the largest share of that £1 billion investment. That highlights their key importance in growing the local economy.

Many people will, rightly, welcome the introduction of the loan fund and the progress made to date on it. However, we need to remember that serious problems still exist in the banking sector and with the availability of finance for indigenous businesses, regardless of size. The loan fund will assist a small number of our larger firms — around 150 by the end of the term — but it will assist only those wishing to borrow more than £50,000 at a time. Most microenterprises would be excluded from that, so I hope that the Executive can take appropriate action and introduce the previously spoken about small, medium and microenterprise loan fund, which will offer loans of between £1,000 and £50,000 to a wider business base that will also include social enterprises. Such a measure would be a welcome addition to the current portfolio available to our job creation agency.

As we are all very aware and as we have seen from job loss announcements, especially the huge losses in the retail banking sector, many businesses face extremely difficult trading conditions. A more proactive approach from the Executive in providing such businesses with early practical assistance would be useful. Perhaps a measure along the lines of the financial capability strategy for consumers, which is proposed in the Programme for Government, or some alternative measure that could help struggling businesses get back on their feet could be assessed. Such an intervention, at an early stage, would be just as useful as creating jobs.

Right across the globe, there is huge duplication in attracting foreign direct investment onto this island. Invest NI and the Industrial Development Authority both carry out the same roles at huge expense to taxpayers. I am sure that, with greater co-operation and integration between those organisations, huge sums of money could be saved and could be put back into creating much-needed jobs on the ground in deprived areas.

If we are to be successful in attracting foreign investors to locate here and assisting our own businesses to expand, we need to ensure that every action possible is taken to reduce their operating costs and improve their competitiveness. The proposal to devolve and reduce corporation tax may well be one of the measures that are implemented. However, it is not necessarily the most important, most effective or best value for the Executive. A

decision needs to be taken at some stage on whether corporation tax should be reduced. I firmly believe that it should be devolved, but a decision to reduce it cannot be made until we are aware of all the facts, particularly what it will cost the Executive. More immediate measures that should be looked at include the potential for reform of the non-domestic rating system so that businesses would pay rates based on their profits and not on the value of a building, which they may only rent. That could be done prior to the revaluation that DFP plans to carry out in 2015. Energy costs are far too high. Regressive taxes such as VAT and fuel duty are far too high and are crippling many businesses and households of all sizes. Those areas, too, need focus. Not all our attention should be on corporation tax.

As well as the much talked-about availability of finance problems faced by businesses seeking to expand, there are huge problems in our planning system. Delays are having a detrimental impact on the ability of our businesses to grow. That is particularly the case with statutory consultations, when there are huge delays in getting a response from Roads Service and the Environment Agency. It is clear that decisions on all planning applications need to be made much more quickly in order to support our economy. Many employed in the construction sector would welcome such a move, as would those waiting to invest in capital projects, so it is positive to see such a target in the Programme for Government.

This document and the economic strategy that will be discussed tomorrow outline the key sectors that we will focus on to enable economic growth. One of those sectors is agrifood. There is much scope for greater co-operation and integration with the rest of the island on food promotion across the globe. The potential for growth in that sector would exponentially increase if we were to embark on such a course.

Although the creation of jobs has to be a key priority for the Assembly, it is also critical that our citizens are appropriately skilled up in the sectors where business and industry need them and that regular and meaningful engagement happens between industry, the Executive and the education system to ensure that a skilled workforce is in place to fill those jobs. We see many announcements of job losses right across society, leaving people out of work and fearful

for their future. Out of a crisis, however, there lies an opportunity. When nothing is certain, everything is possible — that is a quotation from Barry McElduff, by the way. Much more support needs to be given to those who have recently become unemployed but have a certain skill set or expertise that could be slightly tailored to meet the current demands of industry. I would also welcome greater support for young entrepreneurs, even those who are still in education and who may spot an opportunity to start their own business.

Energy prices are, as I said, far too high, inhibiting the growth of business and having a major impact on households. As a society, we are far too reliant on non-sustainable and harmful fossil fuels. We are not tapping into the potential that exists on this island for clean and renewable sources of energy for electricity and heat. The Programme for Government puts in place ambitious and challenging targets of 20% of our electricity and 4% of our heat from renewable sources by 2015, which I welcome as an initial target. However, we could do much better. There are serious questions to be asked of each Department. How can we set a target for renewable heat when public sector organisations continue to use natural gas or home heating oil to heat their buildings? If we are serious about the targets, all public sector organisations will begin to look at the potential for renewable heat generators. The Central Procurement Directorate needs to start facilitating that. I have heard numerous reports from the renewable energy industry that not enough is being done to move public sector buildings away from gas and even home heating oil.

I am firmly of the belief that the island of Ireland can become self-sufficient in renewable energy generation by 2020. However, there needs to be a radical change in how things are done. I am hopeful that much of that work will be central to the new energy Bill, and my party will soon publish its own proposals for the future of energy on this island.

The implementation of an ambitious retrofitting programme, as put forward by the Green New Deal Group, needs to be a key aspect of our energy and fuel poverty strategy. That will also assist in the creation and retention of thousands of jobs. Therefore, I encourage the Executive to take that matter forward as a matter of strategic importance.

Too much emphasis has been placed on the greater Belfast area and on selected parts of the north coast as far as the tourism industry is concerned. Balanced subregional growth will not be possible if that trend continues. In the Programme for Government, there is brief mention of the potential for again hosting the Irish Open in 2015.

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

Mr Flanagan: It will be a tremendous achievement for the Executive if that can happen, but I am sure that there will be huge competition over where the proposed event will be.

4.15 pm

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The SDLP broadly agrees with the five key priorities laid out in the Programme for Government. However, we remain concerned about the continuing lack of detail in the document. The very reason for making a Programme for Government is to set targets and measure the effectiveness of the Government in reaching them. The vague nature of the key commitments in each priority area and the lack of measurable targets in the document will make it very difficult to conduct any analysis of effectiveness or otherwise. This results in a continuing lack of clarity about how the vision aspired to in this document will be achieved and which areas are to be prioritised. We believe that the final document still demonstrates lack of ambition and innovative thinking.

At this time of hardship for many in our community, devolution must deliver. With the juggernaut of welfare reform and its draconian cuts en route from London, we need the Executive to commit to and prioritise ways for this institution to protect those who are most vulnerable. We should not accept devolution that is no better than direct rule. We have options to reform and modernise and to create employment opportunities and incentivise work by making it pay rather than victimising those who are unable to work and making them pay. We must reform our health service to deliver high-quality front line services. All of this should be crystal clear in our Programme for Government. We owe it to those we represent to make ourselves accountable to them and to deliver.

It makes no sense to make the Programme for Government after we set a Budget. We are in

danger of setting priorities based on the money available rather than finding money to meet our priorities. This is a failure to manage as a working Executive and Assembly.

We cannot simply settle for getting through a mandate, as Mr Wells said; we must challenge ourselves not only to get through it but to excel and deliver. We welcome a number of new commitments in the document, quite a few of which we had flagged up in our response to the consultation on the draft. The inclusion of social clauses in all public procurement contracts for supplies, services, and construction will help struggling local people get local opportunities.

We welcome the prioritisation of alleviating fuel poverty. The proposal in the initial document to double-glaze all Housing Executive homes was merely window dressing in that respect. I would like more detail of the additional measures that are to be put in place as per this document.

The commitment to build 6,000 social and 2,000 affordable homes is welcome. However, we would like to see more specific details about that with respect to house types, as changes to housing benefit will dictate demand for more smaller units and HMOs. We would like to see more social housing built at a time when need has never been higher and construction costs have never been lower.

We acknowledge the commitment to the implementation of a childcare strategy. We hope that it can be fulfilled this time. We are concerned that, if it is not fulfilled and if we do not provide access to affordable and safe childcare, the implications of welfare reform will be even more sharply felt.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the opportunity to add this point. Does the Member think that the British Government should fund childcare places, given that they funded all the places in England and Wales? Does he also agree that the childcare strategy is a fundamental building block if the economy is the number one priority in the Programme for Government?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for her question. The childcare strategy and its implementation should be funded by Westminster, and its failure to do so might be perceived as a breach of parity, as it did in England.

We are concerned at the dilution in this Programme for Government of the commitment to tackle child poverty. We should aspire to eradicate it, as the original document did. The welfare of our children is paramount and not to be compromised on.

We perceive that the zeal with which some Departments set about making cuts is not matched in their appetite for protecting the most vulnerable. The SDLP has an unwavering commitment to tackling disadvantage and shielding vulnerable households from the worst impacts of the undeniably grim economic situation. We believe that the coalition Government's welfare cuts and aspects of welfare reform will have a significant detrimental impact on our community. Worryingly, given the potential impact of welfare reform, it is referenced only once in the document. The SDLP believes — we brought it before the House — that the Executive must ensure that they make opposition to the more damaging aspects of welfare reform their highest priority. This programme certainly does not do that.

We welcome the fact that our call for a financial capability strategy has not fallen on deaf ears. We need that to be actioned immediately, as the change to universal credit will undoubtedly result in more of our constituents encountering financial difficulty and debt. We welcome the upgrading of the social protection fund to an annual fund, which was also an SDLP proposal last year. However, on their own, hardship funds of this nature are neither sufficient nor sustainable as a means of tackling poverty. Given that the Budget provided funding for only one year, we wonder where that money will come from. We sincerely hope that it will not come from the remodelling of the social fund and that this is not a disingenuous attempt to portray it as new money to help those in most need.

We are disappointed by the absence from the programme of a mortgage relief or rescue scheme, despite unanimous support for such a scheme in the Chamber only months ago. More and more people are struggling with mortgage debt, and the number of repossessions continues to rise. The cost of helping those people would be nowhere near as great as the financial, societal and personal cost of more people being plunged into homelessness and its associated problems.

As a member of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I have concerns about the lack of specifics in the document. I welcome the overarching aims of Investing for Health and the commitment to establish a strategy for safeguarding children and adults in a domestic and sexual violence and abuse strategy. The document recognises the importance of public health and commits to allocating an increased percentage of the Budget, but we want to know how much of an actual increase that will equate to.

Given that the Compton report has now been published and, it seems, adopted in the document, it would have been useful to see the Department's targets and how it envisages investing in healthcare in respect of front line services and administration. We broadly agree with a lot of the sentiments of the Compton review. However, it is pretty vague about how we will reconfigure, reform and modernise the delivery of health and social care services to improve patient care. It is vital that the funding that it receives is sufficient. The first attempt at reconfiguration, namely the closure of the A&E department at the City Hospital, has certainly not improved patient care. Patients and staff at the Newry and Causeway A&E departments will be worrying about their apparently as yet undecided fate.

We would like to see a clear vision for health and social care in the document. The last Programme for Government was weighed down by a plethora of pledges. I fear that the failure to fulfil so many of those has resulted in a distinct lack of ambition this time round. There has also been a fairly limited exploration of the value of North/South co-operation. In particular, given the Health Minister's continued statements on the need to explore North/South opportunities to safeguard front line services and the best delivery of high-quality care, a commitment to those options should have been made as a workable option in the Programme for Government to maximise the effectiveness —

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

Mr Durkan: — of continually reducing budgets and to manage ever-increasing demands due to the ageing demographic here.

Mr Humphrey: As a member of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, I support the Programme for

Government. There were 45 written responses to the consultation process, and I welcome the contributions from those who took part in it.

The Executive's commitment to building a safe, peaceful and fair society and improving the quality of life for all our people in Northern Ireland is to be welcomed. Obviously, a strong economy is needed to help deliver those aims, and the economic strategy is a key building block to the Executive's top priority of growing a substantial economy and building and improving investment in the future. Developing a strong economy and improving Northern Ireland's competitiveness is essential. During the consultation process, stakeholders welcomed the strategic focus in the report on economic growth and the focus on actions that will deliver the rebalancing of the economy.

I welcome the fact that there are 76 commitments in the draft Programme for Government. However, given the readiness to accept criticism, perhaps there were too many commitments in the draft Programme for Government, and they were overstretched.

Revised targets in respect of manufacturing exports growth have increased from 15% to 20% from the draft Programme for Government. That is to be welcomed. New commitment on youth unemployment to deliver 6,000 work experience and training opportunities for young people by 2015 is also to be welcomed and will be greatly welcomed in my constituency of North Belfast and others like it.

New targets for tourism numbers and visitor spend are to rise to 4.2 million and £676 million by 2014. Those figures are extremely ambitious but are to be welcomed. In Belfast, which is a regional transport hub for Northern Ireland, between 15,000 and 20,000 people are employed full time and part time in the tourism and hospitality sector. Last year, we welcomed eight million visitors to the city, and they spent in excess of £400 million.

Long-term, meaningful employment is the key to the economic success of Northern Ireland. The target of 25,000 jobs spread across the economy is a welcome figure. The creation of new jobs will help to address poverty and fuel poverty, raise morale in the community and in the workforce, increase consumer spending and bring more much-needed confidence to the high street.

I welcome the fact that Ministers have asked for targets to be in line with their collective aspirations and that consultations have been widespread, including the business sector, the private sector and, of course, the community sector.

Delivery monitoring is key to the delivery and operational side of the Programme for Government. The programme will be managed by a Programme for Government board chaired by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and attended by the Finance Minister and head of the Civil Service. As regards delivery, the oversight group will be chaired by the head of the Civil Service and supported by the permanent secretaries group. For the operational side, Departments will create delivery plans, all of which will be published and scrutinised by Committees and the House.

I agree with the comment that the First Minister made earlier to the House when he said that Northern Ireland is one community and we must stop talking about this community as being a fragmented community of different parts. That completely undermines the concept of a shared future and a shared society.

I welcome the fact that Ministers and civil servants have listened to the criticisms of the draft Programme for Government. For too long, Northern Ireland has lagged behind the rest of the United Kingdom on reputation and perception. Of course, 40 years of terrorism has been a particular problem in selling this place nationally and internationally.

The Programme for Government will deal with victims. I attended an event earlier about people who have lost loved ones. We must never forget the absolute loss that some families have felt and continue to feel. We must never forget that cost, but there was also an opportunity cost in having to invest in security and military over the years, which meant that money could not be spent on other areas of the economy.

That has to be remembered and should not be forgotten.

4.30 pm

Now, we can continue to invest in infrastructure for the future. I welcome the town and city regeneration bids, coupled with the progress

in respect of rates and rates relief. Those are hugely important for small businesses.

As I mentioned earlier, the Programme for Government contains a commitment to promote 25,000 jobs, a commitment relating to £300 million investment in foreign direct investment and a commitment to press for the devolution of corporation tax. If the deal and the package are right for Northern Ireland, and if it does not undermine our block grant, the devolution of corporation tax is something that may well give a tremendous impetus to our local economy.

Reference was also made to social clauses. I know that the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister recently visited Crumlin Road jail. There are social clauses in place there, which allow local people to gain meaningful employment.

The commitment to increase the value of manufacturing exports is also to be welcomed. It is an area in which we must be aspirational and one that we must drive forward.

There is also support for a £300 million investment in research and development. Any company going out into the world market must always invest in research and development. It is hugely important to the company's success and its place in the world market.

The extension of the small business rate relief scheme is welcomed by small businesses across Northern Ireland. I have met with chambers of commerce, city centre management and small business owners in my constituency and the centre of Belfast who are very appreciative of that. Of course, holding the regional rate to an increase in inflation is also mentioned.

Reducing the number of councils in Northern Ireland to 11 will also reduce wastage.

The Department for Social Development's commitment to deliver 800 social and affordable homes is most welcome. Reducing fuel poverty across Northern Ireland through initiatives that include preventative measures is another most welcome step, as is the commitment to improve thermal efficiency in Northern Ireland Housing Executive stock. The full programme installation of PVC windows in Housing Executive housing stock is a welcome step, not least for those who live in those properties.

The delivery of at least 30 schemes to improve landscapes in public areas and to promote

private sector investment in towns and cities will massively improve the streetscape of the cities and the aesthetic view to those who visit and shop there.

The establishment of an advisory group to assist Ministers in alleviating hardship is also to be welcomed.

With regard to OFMDFM, the provision of £40 million to address dereliction and to promote investment in physical regeneration in deprived areas through the social fund is to be welcomed. The investment of £40 million to improve pathways to employment, to tackle systematic issues linked to deprivation and to increase community services through the social investment fund is also to be welcomed. I know that Members across the House have mixed views on that. I have been working with many groups in my North Belfast constituency in trying to get them geared up to ensure that they and North Belfast benefit from that investment.

Members have to remember something that most Members said in their contributions. At our meeting of the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week, we had some discussion about the previous Programme for Government. Interestingly, members did not talk about their own party's Departments; they talked about targets not being met by the various Ministers in the previous Programme for Government. What they did not mention was that in September 2008, the world's economy was hit by a massive economic tsunami and the economic slowdown. It is unfortunate that Members from the hokey-cokey parties in the Executive — those who have a foot in and then a foot out, depending on what the issue is or what is being debated in the House — do not remember these things consistently. I think that that is extremely unfortunate.

Mrs D Kelly: In 2007 and leading up to 2007 and 2008, the DUP was the master of hokey-cokey. It was in and out of the Executive Programme for Government. In remembering some of the past, it would do well to be a bit truthful about your own past.

Mr Humphrey: I think that you have made the salient point: we are the masters at it, not the apprentices. The fact of the matter is that the Tories and the Liberals and the contribution —

Mr Allister: That is called putting your foot in it.

Mr Humphrey: Does the Member want to make a point?

Mr Allister: I would be happy to. To say that you are the master of hokey-pokey is, I think, a demonstration of putting your foot in it. However, of course, it well fits the Member because, in 2007, he was one of those in the DUP who was opposed to bringing terrorists into government and heading in the direction that he is headed. Now, of course, he is a key cheerleader for it.

Mr Humphrey: I think —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Maybe we could bring the hokey-pokey to an end.

Mr Humphrey: I actually said hokey-cokey.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will be seated. All remarks must be made through the Chair, and it would be good if we could get back to the debate.

Mr Humphrey: Indeed. I am sorry for that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but you will remember that the Member for Upper Bann took us away from it.

With regard to social change, it is vital to build a shared future in shared space across Northern Ireland. Community confidence is vital. Therefore, I welcome many of the new proposals for Belfast, such as the Titanic Quarter; the World Police and Fire Games; the Tall Ships coming back to Belfast; the development of the Girdwood site; the north foreshore; sports stadia, including Windsor Park, which is hugely and urgently needed for the Northern Ireland supporters; the development and expansion of the Waterfront Hall; the Shankill cultural quarter and the cultural corridor in north Belfast. Seventy-six commitments demonstrating —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will conclude his remarks.

Mr Humphrey: Do I not get an extra minute, Mr Deputy Speaker?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am afraid not.

Mr Humphrey: I welcome the Programme for Government and I believe that it will take Northern Ireland forward. Let us keep Northern Ireland going forward. It is our future, our place, our time.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Chéad-Aire and the LeasChéad-Aire for bringing the

Programme for Government to the House. It is a key document and is the product of a lot of work by the Executive. It is not perfect but it shows that the Executive are a listening Executive.

Some of the general items that attract my support and interest are the inclusion of Sport Matters, which is the strategy for sport and physical recreation to make sure that more of our population takes part in sport and physical activity; the commitment to make the Education and Skills Authority operational by 2013; the delivery of the three major sports stadia; and the Irish language strategy, which I will select here as also being crucial.

I will speak now about a few issues relating to the Department for Employment and Learning. There are four specific Employment and Learning commitments in the Programme for Government, which are to:

“Increase uptake in economically relevant Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics ... places ... Upskill the working age population by delivering over 200,000 qualifications ... Support people (with an emphasis on young people) in to employment by providing skills and training ... Ensure there are no increases in student fees beyond the rate of inflation for [local] students studying here”.

The introduction of tuition fees was a step that increased debt for students and their families and deterred many from disadvantaged and low income backgrounds from taking up higher education. Our party has always stated that it is totally unacceptable that the ability to pay for higher education has now become the benchmark for accessing educational opportunity. We firmly believe that a university campus should be a learning place not a marketplace. We believe that education is a basic right and that it must be based on the ability to learn, not the ability to pay. I welcome the specific commitment that there will be no increases to student fees beyond the rate of inflation for local students here.

There are a number of other mentions of the Department for Employment and Learning. I want to add that I feel strongly that the education maintenance allowance (EMA) perhaps should have been mentioned in the Programme for Government. We have made a number of calls for the Minister for Employment and Learning to commit to the retention of the EMA. However, the Minister has so far failed to do that. I share the concerns of

many young people who fear that there is an appetite for scrapping the allowance. It would be fundamentally wrong to do that. I want to highlight the fact that the EMA needs to be retained and directed at those areas of greatest need in the future.

I want to speak about my constituency of West Tyrone, and perhaps other areas in the north-west and west of the Bann. I specifically welcome the commitment in the Programme for Government to advance the relocation of the headquarters of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development to a rural area by 2015. That is part of a wider agenda to ensure greater balance in subregional growth. I want to mention the A5 as being absolutely crucial to the north-west. I encourage the Executive to continue to use North/South links to help us to deliver on that priority. My colleague Pat Doherty MP dealt adequately with that in his contribution.

There needs to be investment in primary care infrastructure projects. In the near future, I would like to hear the Health Minister's thinking on investing in primary care infrastructure. He has already spoken about it and promised creative funding approaches to ensure that more communities benefit from top-class primary care infrastructure. I have always taken the opportunity to highlight the needs of communities in West Tyrone, specifically Carrickmore and Fintona, for primary care infrastructure to meet the health requirements of local communities.

I also welcome the commitment to significantly progress work on the plan for the Lisanelly shared education campus as a key regeneration project. There is a commitment to develop the business case and plan for the new campus, secure further funding, initiate a development programme, complete the procurement process and embark on phase one of the construction. Those are some constituency-specific items that I wanted to highlight. I will leave it at that.

Mr T Clarke: When you are about the twenty-fourth Member to speak, it is difficult to find something to say that has not been covered already by some of my colleagues. Nonetheless, I welcome the Programme for Government. I listened to others being negative, and it is easy to be negative when they have nothing positive to bring. There are many positives in the Programme for Government. One day when the Committee took evidence from many of the

different sectors involved with the Department, they pointed out some of the good aspects of it but continued to add a wish list. Listening to some Members today, it is difficult to imagine that we would have enough paper in the Assembly to print everything that they wished was in the document.

We are working with a much smaller budget than we had a number of years ago. Taking £4 billion out of the Budget means that it is harder to deliver the vision that we all may aspire to. However, if that money is not there, it makes it more difficult to get to that stage.

That aside, there have been many useful things. During the election last year when we were calling at doors, we discussed many meaningful things that affect the ordinary working-class person, particularly those living in Housing Executive houses who talked about double glazing. The Programme for Government states that all Housing Executive stock will be furnished with double-glazed windows. That is a positive outcome and something that those who have had to endure many cold winters without double glazing will find useful. Many Members talked about high-level parts of the document. However, we must not forget that when we rap on people's doors, should it be a pensioner or someone living on a very modest income, we must deliver something meaningful to them.

There is a promise in the Programme for Government that there will be no increase in student fees, and that has to be welcomed. Although water charges were mentioned previously, the Programme for Government states that there will be no additional charges. The theme running through it is that the Government are listening to the people and trying to effect change and make things less difficult in an economic climate where money is not so readily available.

While going round the doors, I spent much time listening to parents with young children saying how difficult it was to get childcare provision. Again, the Executive have listened to the people on the ground. The knock-on effect of that is that people will be able to get back into employment. There are young families who want to hold down full-time jobs but find that difficult because of childcare provision. However, that issue has been addressed.

I also welcome the £80 million that has been committed to the Antrim area over the next

three years from the social investment fund. There are blights on the landscape in Antrim that have been there for many years.

If communities can organise themselves to work together, there are opportunities around derelict buildings. There is upwards of £40 million there, so there are opportunities to put community projects together to try to restore some areas that have turned into blights on the landscape for many years.

4.45 pm

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that dealing with derelict buildings goes beyond the pure economic benefit that can be clearly seen in employment in construction work, for example, and also has a very positive impact on increasing morale in those areas? An area can have a very downtrodden feeling that can be further dragged down by having derelict buildings there. They are an eyesore and they establish a culture or a feeling of neglect. The level of motivation can also go down in such areas. So, there are positive spin-offs, beyond the pure economic advantages of jobs, employment and investment, that can have a multiplier effect in the area as well.

Mr T Clarke: I agree. The first thing that springs to mind is the short-term economic benefit in securing jobs, but as the Member quite rightly said, that is only in the short term.

Nothing brings down the tone of an area like dereliction. I am thinking of the Ulster Bar corner in Antrim, which has been derelict for upwards of 25 years. That gives the impression that the town is not open for business, and that discourages investment there. The Member is quite right: although the Executive have made that amount of money available, let us hope that communities come together and make proposals to invest that money so that we can restore confidence there. When these buildings are restored, if investors want to look at particular areas, they will see that the area is open for business. All in all, I welcome the proposals in the Programme for Government and its endorsement today.

Mr Eastwood: There are some positive aspects to this Programme for Government, but, unfortunately, it is largely a disappointing document. I believe that every Government should be judged by their commitment to

children and, in particular, their ability to deal with child poverty. Unfortunately, this Programme for Government rolls back from previous commitments to eradicate child poverty and singularly fails to set any independent target for the North of Ireland. That is not good enough. It is not good enough to simply follow the Tory Government's child poverty plan. We know the effects of successive Tory Governments' policies on our poorest children in the past.

On the subject of children, it is good to see a commitment to a childcare strategy. However, we have seen that commitment before and it has not been acted on to date. It is now time for action.

It is also clear that this Assembly's record on legislation has been nothing short of abysmal. There is no legislative programme attached to this Programme for Government. In fact, the legislative output of this Assembly since the election last May has been less than half of that proposed by the Scottish Parliament. If devolved government is to instigate the kind of positive change promised and hoped for, it is imperative that Stormont significantly shifts its focus from the comfort of stability to the challenges of the realpolitik.

Legislative change, its instigation and scrutiny is a primary function of any Executive body and its linked legislature. Put simply, it is what politicians are elected to do. The clue is in the name: MLA — Member of the Legislative Assembly. If this Programme for Government is to substantively deliver for the people of the North, producing a legacy of robust, agreed legislation must be central to its ambition.

The document also fails entirely to address the past. There are some references to the ongoing work with victims and survivors, but the broader legacies of historical cases and themes contained within inquiries, coroners' courts and the ombudsman's office are totally neglected. The proposals of the victims' commissioners and the Eames/Bradley group are not given mention, nor is there any indication that they will be. Given the expense and political impact, not to mention the engrained and lasting hurt to victims, survivors and our societal makeup in general, this omission is one that needs to be highlighted.

There is also no mention of any strategy or framework for how the Executive will deal with forthcoming centenaries on the island.

There is no commitment to engage with both Governments on the best mechanism to cohesively and maturely deal with our shared heritage, traditions and past. That needs to be rectified.

It is very welcome that Derry's One Plan is mentioned in the document. The Programme for Government gives a commitment to develop the plan. However, people need to know what that means. There are 11 catalytic projects in the One Plan, the most important and fundamental of which is the expansion of the Magee campus. However, the programme completely fails to deal with that issue. If the Executive are truly committed to balanced economic development, they must lift the cap on student numbers at Magee immediately. It is also notable that any reference to the Ilex regeneration company has been removed, and I would like to hear from OFMDFM whether there is any reason for that omission.

It is also worrying to learn that the Bain report on decentralisation has seemingly been left on the shelf. As a result of a series of ministerial questions that I tabled, it has been made clear to me that less than 5% of Northern Ireland Civil Service jobs are located in Derry, the second city, and that more than 60% of them are located in the greater Belfast area. There has been no attempt made in the programme to redress that imbalance. I welcome the commitment to develop —

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. We all want to see a fair distribution of jobs. However, in respect of the figures the Member quoted, does he accept that roughly 5% of the population live in the Foyle constituency and about 60% live in the greater Belfast area and that what we have, therefore, reasonably reflects the overall balance of the population?

Mr Eastwood: There is a very clear understanding that the Executive have only so many economic levers. However, one thing they can do very easily is to move a number of Departments or jobs around this part of the country. I welcome the commitment by the Agriculture Department. However, there is a major gap in the city of Derry and the surrounding areas in the north-west. If you look at the unemployment figures, Mr Weir, you will see very clearly that Derry has been left behind —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Eastwood: — not only by successive British Governments but by successive Stormont Governments. I will move on.

I welcome the commitment to deliver a creative industries hub at Ebrington. Digital industries are at the core of Derry's balanced economic development, and that is central to the City of Culture project. I would also like to see the City of Culture receiving an injection of tourism advertisement similar to the very positive Your Time, Our Place campaign.

As a party, we are very disappointed at the lack of any real, tangible commitment to further enhance North/South integration in the Programme for Government. Unfortunately, the document does not go anywhere near far enough to address the real and urgent needs of our people. It is no longer good enough to see stability as success. From now on, success should be measured by delivery.

Mr Dickson: The Alliance Party is generally supportive of the Programme for Government that has been brought forward, and we will be supporting the motion. I would like to focus on the commitments around regional development and justice, and the overarching issues contained in both of them.

I begin by discussing the commitments in relation to sustainable public transportation. Northern Ireland needs effective and efficient transport infrastructure. That is important for local residents and workers and for the future development of the local economy. Transport is also a cross-cutting theme for all Departments, so a joined-up approach in that area is essential. Over the years, the Government have concentrated investment on roads infrastructure, which is important. However, that focus has helped to create the car-dependent society in which we live. There is an imbalance in the transport budget, with roads taking precedence to the detriment of an integrated and inclusive public transport network. That has contributed significantly to Northern Ireland having the highest carbon footprint in the United Kingdom. Emissions have not risen as a result of the transport sector alone. However, they have risen significantly in Northern Ireland, by nearly 40%.

That highlights the need not only to reduce car dependency but to have a joined-up approach to government and to how investment in public transport is connected intimately to other

commitments in the Programme for Government, such as that under priority 3, through which the Executive said they will work towards a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.

Over-reliance on the private car also contributes to congestion and fuel poverty. I, therefore, welcome the commitment to spend some £500 million on more sustainable modes of transport. However, despite that investment, around only 14% of DRD's capital budget is being directed towards passenger transport, whereas the regional transportation strategy suggests that it ought to be in the region of 35%. Even that latter figure is at odds with spending patterns in most European countries, which invest significantly more in their public transport infrastructure. Sadly, those who suffer most from underinvestment in public transport are, often, the most vulnerable: older, disabled and younger people, women and the unemployed. It is an issue not just of personal transport preferences or emissions but of equality.

I also have some concerns about how the £500 million is to be spent. For example, despite recent emphasis on the importance of active travel, in an answer to a written question from Mr Agnew, the Minister did not mention active travel schemes as part of that funding. Indeed, reference was made only to small sums of seed funding for sustainable transport initiatives. We need to do better if we are to truly promote more sustainable modes of transportation in Northern Ireland. Although I welcome the £500 million investment, as my party has noted, facilitating a major shift in travel behaviours will require significantly more investment. I hope that that £500 million can be built upon over the next few years as we move towards our next Programme for Government.

Similarly, we welcome the commitment to maintain 77 million passenger journeys per annum. In recognising the importance of public transport, it is most welcome that such a commitment is in the Programme for Government. However, that target has been in place since 2008. So, it does not reflect the commitment to a modal shift from car to public transport that we would all like to see.

There are immediate opportunities to cut waste and save money in the transport sector. My party has highlighted the lack of commitment to Departments working together to address a range of transport problems. Our transport

resources are not used to their full potential. We need to sweat down those resources so that we can work more cleverly to create better solutions. We would like to have seen a commitment to DRD, DHSSPS and DE working together to conduct a cross-departmental review of transport strategy expenditure to identify the potential to share resources. Innovative solutions will save the three Departments money and create better access to transport for all. Although the opportunity for solid commitment to that in the Programme for Government has now passed, it is still possible for Departments to work together on that issue. My party would very much welcome that.

Staying on the theme of effective collaboration, I am disappointed to see that DRD is listed as the only Department to see through the commitment to create conditions to facilitate more walking and cycling to school when there is clearly a key role for the Department of Education in achieving that. It is also disappointing that no reference is made in that commitment to ensuring road safety for cyclists and pedestrians. Nevertheless, my party welcomes the commitment and hopes that we will see a real increase in the numbers of pupils who walk and cycle to school.

I welcome the allocation of an additional £68 million to water infrastructure. My party has long highlighted that our current water arrangements are unsustainable. Projected funding for the period up to 2021 is a cause of real concern, and it is imperative that action is taken swiftly to address governance arrangements for Northern Ireland Water. Although we pay for some of the cost of water and sewerage services as part of the regional rate, those contributions do not cover the full cost of running the service. The level of payment is considerably lower than that which people elsewhere in the United Kingdom pay. It costs us some £200 million each year. It is not funded through the block grant, so money is directed from other public services to cover the subsidy. The result is that people are already paying through underinvestment in other areas, such as hospitals and schools.

It is, therefore, the less well off and the more vulnerable who depend most on our public services and the failure to cover the cost of water service delivery hits them disproportionately. Although that extra investment is welcome, we need to think seriously about the future governance arrangements for our water.

5.00 pm

I now turn to the subject of justice. I welcome the justice commitments, in particular the commitment to reduce the number of interface structures. My party has a vision of a cohesive, shared and integrated society. Creating a shared future is one of the greatest challenges facing Northern Ireland, which remains characterised by territory and public space that is marked out by exclusive symbols. Recently, however, with an Alliance Party Justice Minister in place, we have seen interface structures opened. Community dialogue and consultation have been vital to that development, and we are happy to see engagement with communities enshrined in the Programme for Government. If we are to create a shared future for all, continuing along that path is imperative.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Perhaps the greatest challenge that we face in the area of justice is in getting effective collaboration and joined-up working with other Departments. Too often, other Departments fail to intervene early enough to tackle problems, and the Department of Justice is wrongly held responsible and has to pick up the pieces. The Alliance Party has argued for a long time that when it comes to justice issues, all other Departments have an important role to play. My party colleagues Mr Ford and Dr Farry have demonstrated what can be achieved when Departments work together. For example, the new Donard Centre at Maghaberry reflects cross-departmental responsibility for prisoner rehabilitation and recognises the role that DEL and DHSSPS must play in dealing with vulnerable prisoners.

As I finish, I reiterate that the Alliance Party is supportive of the Programme for Government and will support the motion. We are pleased that the need for collaborative working and joined-up government were given more emphasis in the final document, but it is disappointing that an opportunity was missed to include more about early intervention. The Alliance Party would like to see the principles of joined-up government, early intervention and creating a shared future assuming even greater primacy in the programme.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. It is useful to have this debate and to focus on the priorities and the issues that really count. The Programme

for Government is our way forward. It is about our and our young people's futures. Far too many of us have been in too many houses over the last wee while and have heard about young people day and daily leaving our shores to go to Australia. There is a huge onus and responsibility on the Assembly and the Executive to offer an alternative and a pathway to young people and, as I will highlight as I go through the tenets and tones of my speech, to the most vulnerable people in our society in particular. The Programme for Government does not address those key elements; there is not enough substantial detail in it on that. There are elements that are welcome, but there are others that show that not enough thought or focus have been given to the way forward, or to creating a safety cushion for those who are continually in the extreme situations and have fallen on hard times.

We broadly agree with the five key priorities in the Programme for Government. Some of those are indeed priorities, but others are vague and their nature and the key commitments show that targets seem to be absent. Indeed, that theme has been repeated in the Assembly this evening. There should be clear targets and commitments for delivery, with each Department having clear responsibilities and accountability. The Programme for Government lacks ambition and innovation on the part of the Executive on those matters, and that needs to be said. I am not being negative; I am making a statement of fact that has been repeated by many sectors and stakeholders outside this Building. As I do, they want to see the Executive and the Assembly doing well, but, more importantly, they want to see them doing well for our young people and our society.

We want to see devolution that is meaningful, that is different from direct rule, and that delivers for our people, particularly in our rebalancing the economy. We know the problems that the economy faces and the difficulties that exist. People who have become unemployed for the first time are coming to our doors and they are looking to the Assembly to deliver, rebalance and rebuild.

That, nevertheless, presents us with an opportunity and a challenge. For example, when it comes to tax-varying powers, we welcome the fact that there is some intent to press for a reduction in corporation tax. However, it is a very long drawn-out process that seems to appear

one day and disappear the next, with very little detail being worked out either by the Treasury or the Executive. There are a lot of businesses that look to that as but one element of a recovery for the North and, indeed, for this island. They want to see measures being delivered and worked through between us and, in this instance, the British Treasury to start creating jobs for our community and to give us hope.

We need to make sure that it is not entirely a win-win for the Treasury that allows it to say that we can reduce our block grant while at the same time it takes the receipts from PAYE. That is for the detailed negotiation, but it is exactly that detail and those key elements that people want to hear more about. I recently attended meetings with businesses, and those are exactly the questions that they are posing to me and have asked me to relay here. It can be included in the Programme for Government, but we want to hear about a bit more focus.

It is good to see capital investment projects in the Programme for Government. I welcome the commitment to the police and emergency services college and to hospital projects in various parts of the North. That is good, because projects such as those and roads projects will help to sustain and support existing businesses. On that note, I want to refer specifically to job creation. The Programme for Government contains a commitment to move 114,000 working-age benefit clients into employment. Frankly, that is the bit that I do not get. I do not know where the employment is into which to move those people, nor is it clear where or how those 114,000 positions are to be made available for people to move into. I hope that the document is not just smoke and mirrors. I hope that there is a commitment to have 114,000 positions available for those people. However, that is entirely unclear from the commitment and from the document.

I turn to the issue of raising additional finance. There are some areas on which we had hoped to get more detail. For example, on the creation of a local investment bond to raise money for school building and on aiming to expand local government borrowing to fund community development projects, and even on an infrastructure bank to finance large public building projects. Those are the things that we would like to hear about.

The draft Programme for Government commits to modernising our energy provision through increased or accelerated investment in renewables and the green economy. I want to hear more detail on the green new deal, because many people have very high hopes for it. At one level, it will reduce health budget expenditure on cold-related illnesses and deal with elements of climate change, making it cheaper for people, particularly elderly and vulnerable people, to live in their own homes, while at the same time creating jobs. That aspect of the green new deal is not being teased out properly. I realise that some cross-departmental work has been carried out, but that is what we need to see and that is the hope that people want to hear about from our Executive.

I turn now to North/South co-operation. I attended a very successful conference on Thursday, which was organised by my party and addressed by the Minister in the South, Simon Coveney, who showed how his Department is working on the agrifood sector and has within its total grasp the detailed issues that need to be dealt with to expand that sector to help it to grow and be nurtured even further. I also attended a meeting with the Quarry Products Association on Thursday evening, at which the Ulster Bank's chief economist, Richard Ramsey, showed us that the agriculture sector has grown by 20%. I would have liked to have seen the best resources in both parts of this island, particularly in that sector, being more manifest on North/South co-operation in the Programme for Government.

Mrs D Kelly: Does the Member share my disappointment that given that the milk quota will be lifted in 2013, there is no commitment to an all-island strategy for the dairy sector to take advantage of the opportunities that that will present?

Mr McGlone: I thank the Member for making that point. Minister Coveney highlighted that potential and those options in very positive way. We could learn a number of lessons, and I would welcome increased North/South co-operation, not to make a particular party political point but because it makes sense for our people, who want investment in jobs, and it makes sense for many of our young people who are now attending Queen's University, which is becoming vastly oversubscribed in that area. That is the hope that they want to see, as

they want a future for themselves and for their families.

On the tourism front, we welcome the commitment to increased visitor numbers and tourist spend in the North but we are concerned to see some more detail in the draft Programme for Government to expand on that pledge.

I will move to the social protection fund and a welfare reform mitigation fund. The SDLP welcomes the fact that the draft Programme for Government refers to the social protection fund as an annual fund. It has to be recognised that the North's Budget provided funding for the social protection fund for only one financial year. That was money that was previously spent on fuel payments. We have to look at that. I am anxious to see whether there is any move or transition to bury the overall social fund in the social protection fund, which includes dealing with child poverty, childcare issues, employment support and preschool education. I was disappointed to hear from the Minister for Social Development that he had ruled out a form of support for people in mortgage debt.

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

Mr McGlone: That would help to ease a situation for an awful lot of people in our society, and I was disappointed that it was not there.

Mr Speaker: Time is up.

Mr McGlone: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I could have said much more, obviously.

Mr Allister: I am sure that our constituents, who sent us here 10 months ago, will be very grateful and impressed that, 10 months later, the Government that were then installed have got around to a Programme for Government. It is not much of a record, is it? Yet today, OFMDFM, as brash and bold and boastful as ever, presents its Programme for Government as if it is what we have all been waiting for — the panacea, the answer to all our problems. Of course, on cue, all its ingratiating acolytes have been on their feet to tell it about the wonderful job that it has been doing.

OFMDFM was not quite as available when it had to sneak out a written statement to concede how few of the targets of the previous Programme for Government it actually met, how one third of those were never met and how 44% of its key goals and commitments were not met. OFMDFM was not so loud and boastful

then. It slipped out a little written statement and did not even come to the House to talk about it. It is against that background and in that context that I and, I believe, many of my constituents will judge this document. It will be judged against the fact that the previous Administration, which was made up of the same people, produced a Programme for Government that they littered with failure to meet their own targets and their own key ambitions. Therefore, why should anyone think that the same people will do anything different this time and that this Programme for Government will not become another testament to the failure of this dysfunctional form of government that is inflicted on us? I, for one, certainly do not expect its outcome to be any different.

5.15 pm

This document is glossy, nicely produced and looks very well. If you simply flick through it, you will say, "Yes, that looks good". However, its content is utterly vague and vacuous. Of course, it is not really there to secure delivery but to tick a box and say, "Didn't we produce a nice Programme for Government? Yes, it might have taken us 10 months, but we are very busy people, you know. We have all sorts of places to go and all sorts of people to meet. We really are so busy that you cannot expect us to do better than produce a Programme for Government in 10 months. Do not look too hard at how we failed the last time because none of that was our fault, you know. We are the victim of circumstances. Yes, we are in government, but we cannot really control anything". And so the retinue of excuses rolls out.

When I look at the state of our health service, I wonder where some of our government Ministers are hiding. Do they listen to the accounts of people such as an 86-year-old woman who waited on a trolley for 34 hours apparently having had a stroke in Antrim hospital with no provision, no attendance to her and no help for her? That is replicated time after time. Why? Because we have a policy of running down the health service.

A year ago, there was a hapless Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who was ridiculed at every turn and told that he was failing and not producing. That was not because he had no money, because, we were told, there was loads of money for Mr McGimpsey. Yet, now that those who made those charges are in

office, we have shambles written over our health service. Why? Because we have the closure at Belfast City Hospital. Oh sorry, that was only temporary, we were told. No one believed that, and it will prove to be otherwise. Now the Royal cannot cope. Now the same Minister wants to inflict the same thing on my constituency in North Antrim by running down the acute services in the Causeway Hospital and channelling much of them into an already overstretched Antrim hospital that is not coping.

This Government's record on basic provision on things such as health is one of abject, lamentable failure, and there is nothing in this Programme for Government that will improve anything at all in that regard. All my constituency can look forward to is the running down of the Causeway Hospital and all the negative ramifications of that.

They tell us, "Oh, we are short of money". They are not so short of money that they cannot spend £5 million on their spin doctor departments. They are not so short of money that they cannot spend £4.5 million on hospitality. They are not so short of money — you could hardly make this up — when they have recently signed a contract for £400,000 with photographers to take photographs of them. It is such vanity and such farce that we have in government those who think that it is more important to have a contract with photographers to take their photographs so as they might smile out of the newspaper at us and us pay for the privilege than to attend to and fix our health service. That, in many ways, says it all.

Then we come to this Programme for Government. You could take many subjects, but let me take the issue of upcoming events. We were all glad to hear that in 2013, the city of Londonderry is to be the United Kingdom City of Culture. Yet, in this document, that fact is sanitised out. It is now just the City of Culture.

I am sorry: its correct title is the United Kingdom City of Culture. Why do we have a Government that cannot even use the proper title? Of course, it is because there are those in this Government who veto and who will not allow the proper title to be used, and then there are those who toady and go along with it. That is why, in the Programme for Government, it is the City of Culture instead of its proper title.

That is why, according to the Programme for Government, we are now to have the Maze

project proceed, with £18 million to create a conflict resolution centre built around the ugly, disreputable buildings of the Maze prison. It is to enable people, such as the Member for Foyle Mr Raymond McCartney, to boast, a week or two ago, in respect of the project, that the listed and retained buildings, including an H Block, the prison hospital, the visitors' and administration blocks, will be open to the public and that there will be the opportunity for the many stories of the jail to be told. Then there are those who try to tell their constituents that building the conflict transformation centre has nothing to do with pleasing Sinn Féin, nothing to do with recapturing and retaining the prison buildings at the Maze, and that they will be totally separate. They will not be so separate that Mr McCartney does not anticipate using them to tell the IRA's story of the Troubles, and what a distortion that will be.

If we need a conflict transformation centre, I ask a very simple question that I have asked before: why put it in a place where it will be tainted by the history of that place, where there are IRA citadel buildings that will taint its every dimension? If we need one, why is it not on a greenfield site? It is simple, of course: Sinn Féin will not allow it to be anywhere else, and what Sinn Féin wants, Sinn Féin gets.

Mr McNarry: You could get into a row very easily in this place. [*Laughter.*] I am not so sure of the acolyte syndrome, but, suffered or not, I am a committed devolutionist, and I welcome the genuine good intentions and commitments that I see made today by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister in their presentation of the Executive's Programme for Government. They bring forward challenges and a primary focus for the next four years on growing our economy and tackling disadvantage. They have set the bar high for themselves and for those who share in that view of what we can attain and aspire to do.

In the best of times, people would be restless, but in continued difficult times, I see it as a spirited rallying call to our citizens, emphasising what I think they want to hear: that they are foremost in our minds here in the Assembly, charged with the duties that we have. Capturing the needs of the people should be matched with embracing their uncertainties and some of the depth of despair over hardships. Therefore, in order to win support for what is being proposed and to instil confidence in anticipation of the

new shoots of better times ahead, let us inform people that preparations are already in place to replace disadvantage with advantage. In doing so, let us also demonstrate confidence in ourselves by pulling together to sell this ambitious programme in a manner that resonates with the people.

Earlier, I listened to the Chair of the Education Committee pull no punches in his concerns that there is still much more clarity to be given on the direction that education is taking and, indeed, where it might end up. In my opinion, today's Programme for Government falls short both of direction and outcome where the expectations of parents, pupils and teaching staff are concerned. I welcome the commitments that are given on preschool education, STEM places, raising attainments by school-leaving time, participation in shared education, and, in particular, the involvement of ministerial advisory groups. Those will, of course, make a difference, but I suggest to the House that there is not four years to think about school closures or mergers or the unacceptable school-leaving qualifications of young Protestants, which is a matter that is plaguing this society. Those are serious issues that parents, pupils and teachers attempt to cope with all too regularly.

This may be implicit in what the First Minister and deputy First Minister are thinking, and I should be fair to the Education Minister's position as he strives to resolve these issues. However, more delivery on these issues is necessary to enable the Executive to take credit for improvements in education and to show that they have the confidence to sell the way forward. If that confidence does not permeate out from this House to the people, this exercise is nearly void. We are here to listen, criticise and respect criticism, but if we do not get the message out there, we are failing in our duties. I believe that people out there want to hear what we have to say, but they also say, "Go for it; take us through this. Show us how we get through it." I think that parents and pupils want to hear that message about education loud and clear. It would demonstrate that the Assembly sees the investment in our children's future as a top five priority and that it goes beyond the scope that it has set.

I use this opportunity to inject a plea urging us to sprint forward to making our schools estate available for the community at large for full and

best use. I urge a commercial mentality in thinking through how bricks-and-mortar, let alone hard-cash, assets can be valued in real terms so that many hard-pressed communities can benefit.

As I suggested, the importance of what is being said in the commitments that I read cannot be allowed to pass the people by. That message — our message — will be better understood by selling the priorities and commitments and by bringing the people with us. I suggested that we need to ask people to buy in to our optimism and our abilities to keep Northern Ireland working. The job is to keep us working and to create that future for the young people. I wish the Executive well but I ask them to show us the effort over the next four years. That is what we all need to see.

Mr M McGuinness (The deputy First Minister):

I listened carefully to the points that were made during the debate. It is a powerful testament to the Assembly that we are able to discuss the Programme for Government so openly and, at times, passionately. As the debate demonstrated, we do not always agree on the approach to be taken on various policy issues. However, I believe that everyone here agrees on the need for a comprehensive programme of reform, the need for real delivery on the ground and the need to look forward to a brighter tomorrow by investing our efforts, talents and goodwill today.

I think that we have a lot to be hopeful about. Last week, the First Minister and I were very fortunate to see Terry and Oorlagh George's Oscar-winning film 'The Shore'.

It is a stunning example of the way in which we can capitalise on the power of the creative industries based here. It is an example of how we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by working together. In essence, it is a reflection of our journey from conflict to peace. We should never take for granted the magnitude of our journey and how we in the North of Ireland can be a beacon of hope in a world dominated by war and conflict. 'The Shore' is an example of how, when we speak with our creativity and our hard work, the world listens. It is not an isolated example but one in a series of recent happenings that prove that we are moving forward decisively.

5.30 pm

Earlier, the First Minister listed events that will take place in 2012, events of tremendous international historical and cultural interest. I have no doubt that the opening of the new arts centre, the opening of the Titanic visitors' centre, the arrival of the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race in Derry and all the other events planned in Our Time, Our Place will be a great success. They will have a direct impact, attracting much-needed tourism for our economy and, as importantly, driving it home again and again that we can compete with anywhere else in the world when it comes to our heritage, hospitality and humour.

Of course, it is not enough to assume that the creativity and talent of our people alone will bring us through the economic and fiscal challenges that we face as a result of the global credit crisis and subsequent downturn. We need a plan, and it needs to be good. Having consulted widely on the Programme for Government and listened to the debate, we feel that it is clear that people want and need us to support them in creating a better future for themselves, their families and their communities. That is why we need to move beyond rhetoric and debate and into delivery that people can experience at first hand. The Programme for Government is our opportunity to set a course towards prosperity, health and well-being for everyone, including those who feel isolated and excluded. We have the tremendous privilege of being able to agree a plan that will transform our society and make it a place where people want to live, not just during the course of this Programme for Government but for many decades to come. On 17 November last year, I stated:

"we collectively ... need to raise our game ... to improve the economy." — [Official Report, Vol 68, No 7, p385, col 1].

I believe that to be as true now as it was then. We need ambition and aspiration, and I make no apologies for saying that.

People may sometimes confuse the drive to achieve equality with a desire to reduce the ambitions of those who want to succeed. Nothing could be further from the truth. We need to find a way to ensure that everyone feels that they can succeed in life, particularly children and young people living in poverty. Our efforts need to focus on lifting their sights and

helping them to make the very best of their potential. So, equality and economy are not incompatible — quite the opposite. To put it simply, inequalities prevent people contributing their energies and talents. That is why we need an economy that supports everyone, from a single parent in the Short Strand or the Shankill to the teenager in Fintona or the Bogside. A vibrant economy based on private sector investment will be the route out of poverty for many people, families and communities.

The draft Programme for Government included a stretching commitment to produce 25,000 jobs. It is crucial that we achieve that ambitious level of job creation. The current version of the programme also sets out £1 billion of investment to support that, including £375 million from foreign direct investment, £400 million from indigenous businesses supported by Invest NI and £225 million as a result of the jobs fund. In addition to the new and enhanced commitments to the increased drawdown of EU funding and increased manufacturing exports, the Programme for Government before us today includes further commitments that will directly or indirectly impact on the economy. Many Members commented on those new commitments, and I am pleased that they received a broad welcome. They include support for 200 projects through the creative industries innovation fund; the development of sports stadia, as agreed with the IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby; an extension of the small business rate relief scheme to 2015; investment in social enterprise growth; an investment of £40 million to address dereliction and promote investment in the physical regeneration of deprived areas through the social investment fund; an investment of £40 million to improve pathways to employment, tackle systemic issues linked to deprivation and increase community services through the social investment fund; and increasing young people's uptake of places in economically relevant science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses.

It is also clear that people want us to focus on the needs of the most vulnerable, and we have listened. Several Members have commented on the importance of the Executive working in a more joined-up manner. The Delivering Social Change framework is a tangible example of that and represents a direct response to the consultation, which identified the requirement to address the needs of a range of groups in society, including people from ethnic minority

backgrounds, children, people with disabilities and victims and survivors. Through that framework, we will ensure that Departments concentrate on a small number of focused actions that can really make a difference: early interventions, parenting, family support, childcare and social enterprise.

We recognise that people have a wide range of needs and want to see them reflected in our plans and priorities. We also recognise that strategies that promise everything sometimes deliver little or nothing, so it is our clear intention to develop a single, coherent action plan that will address the needs of children and young people, tackle multigenerational poverty and improve people's life opportunities. Other examples include commitments to initiatives aimed at reducing fuel poverty; improving the thermal efficiency of Housing Executive stock and ensuring full double glazing; publishing and implementing a childcare strategy with key actions to provide integrated and affordable childcare; and using the social protection fund to help individuals and families facing hardship due to the current economic downturn.

Mr Byrne: I thank the deputy First Minister for giving way. It is fair to say that the Programme for Government outlines a long series of objectives and targets, and that is to be welcomed. Will the deputy First Minister state whether he and the First Minister are content with the way that the Senior Civil Service operates and how it governs and administers Northern Ireland? Given that we have had 40 years of direct rule, it is crucial that we have reform of the most senior levels of the Civil Service to make sure that the political dynamic can attain the objectives that have been outlined.

Mr M McGuinness: Many Assembly Members and Ministers in this Administration have, over the years, had all sorts of debates and discussions about the support that we receive from the Civil Service and the quality of leadership that we have had. Some people have been critical, others complimentary. The First Minister and I recognise the importance of ensuring that there is a good working relationship between us as politicians and the Civil Service. The Civil Service realises, with regard to the governance of this place through the Executive, that we are in charge. We are the politicians; it is our job to give leadership, and that we have done. We recently appointed

a new head of the Civil Service, who is working very positively and constructively with the First Minister and me. I have no doubt whatsoever that there is a very deep appreciation within the Civil Service, from which we receive tremendous support, that we need to move forward together.

It is worth noting, in respect of the social protection fund, which I just mentioned, that we are issuing fuel payments to some 250,000 people this year.

I now turn to some of the points made during the debate. Rebalancing the economy came up, and, understandably, many Members addressed that issue, which is central to the Programme for Government. Tom Elliott, Conor Murphy, Phil Flanagan, Patsy McGlone and Margaret Ritchie raised the specific issue of corporation tax and progress on our negotiations with the British Government. I attended a meeting last week at the Treasury along with the First Minister, the Finance Minister and the Enterprise Minister. We left the Treasury in no doubt of the importance and urgency of devolving those powers. We will continue to press hard for a solution that benefits all the people of the North.

Mr McCarthy: I am grateful to the deputy First Minister for giving way. Not so long ago, your Finance Minister, in response to a question when he was over there, was anything but enthusiastic about corporation tax coming to Northern Ireland. In fact, I think that he said that he was a unionist. Does the deputy First Minister acknowledge that his Finance Minister is on board?

Mr M McGuinness: We have shown over recent times that we have a very united Executive and Assembly in relation to desiring the devolution of corporation tax powers to our Administration. People are entitled to their views on what is a very important matter. However, this is not about politics; it is about how we get people jobs and attract foreign direct investment.

The First Minister and I have seen, as a result of successful forays to the United States of America, that in recent years we have brought in more foreign direct investment jobs — thousands of new jobs — than at any other time in the history of the Northern state. So a key commitment that we have enhanced as a result of the consultation that we are involved in is a £1 billion investment that includes £375 million in foreign direct investment, £400 million from indigenous businesses and £225 million as a

result of the jobs fund. It is important to stress that that is primarily additional private sector investment that our Programme for Government will stimulate.

Tom Elliott, Chris Lyttle, Colum Eastwood and Dolores Kelly, among others, raised the issue of the legislative programme. Although the Programme for Government is much broader than a legislative programme, legislation will be a key element in its delivery. The legislative programme will flow naturally from key commitments in the Programme for Government, and we are looking at options for bringing it to the Assembly.

The issue of welfare reform commitments was raised by Alex Maskey, Chris Lyttle, Dolores Kelly and Mark Durkan. They raised points about the impact of welfare reform on people in the North. As Members are aware, those are Westminster Government proposals, and there is a high degree of concern about them, which we share. We have a responsibility as an Executive to protect people, particularly the most vulnerable, from any potential negative impact. We will do what we can to mitigate the worst aspects of the reforms through the work of the welfare advisory group, for example.

The issue of child poverty was raised by Dolores Kelly, Colum Eastwood and Mark Durkan. Of course, we need to have specific targets on child poverty, but targets are important only in driving delivery. The Delivering Social Change programme is important because it will support a single policy framework to address children's issues, child poverty and wider poverty issues. That will, of course, lead to targets that are real, well informed and deliverable.

The issue of Maze/Long Kesh came up. That development is hugely important for regeneration, peace building and conflict resolution. We will take forward the project carefully and with great sensitivity. However, there are Members who seem determined to make political capital out of what is a positive and economically advantageous project, not only for the community in Lagan Valley but for all of us. Is Tom Elliott seriously suggesting that we refuse £18 million of European funding for a project that shows how we as a society have moved on from conflict to peace? I am amazed at the attitude of the Ulster Unionist Party. I am amazed because I have repeatedly made it clear that it will be a shrine to peace,

peace building and conflict resolution. We know that there is intense interest throughout the world in how we moved from conflict to peace. People are interested in coming here, and it has been clearly established that many people will travel to our shores in the aftermath of the construction of that building so that they can learn from our experiences. This is not about political one-upmanship or telling one side of the story over another; it is about being inclusive. I am shocked and surprised that people such as Mike Nesbitt and others do not appreciate the importance of that.

5.45 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he accept that one of the difficulties is that, within the Protestant, unionist, loyalist community, the danger is not only lack of support because of the venue of the centre but the likelihood of alternative centres being built, taking away from the central point of having one repository?

Mr M McGuinness: Given the history of the project, it has been clearly shown that, in the beginning, your party was very enthusiastic about the project. I am at a loss to understand why that enthusiasm has been lost. I can only consider that the Ulster Unionist Party thinks that this is a useful point to try to score over the Democratic Unionist Party. I commend the Democratic Unionist Party for holding its nerve on this issue. One thing that, I think, I have managed to convince its members of is that we on this side of the House have no intention of letting them or anybody else down in relation to how we, with great sensitivity, handle the project. This project, along with the relocation of the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society and all the attendant operations that will come into play in what will probably be the most important investment site on the whole island of Ireland, is something that we need to develop into a place where we can bring great numbers of people. That will greatly enhance the economic prospects of the people not just of Lagan Valley but of the whole of the North.

Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Is it not the case that it was the Ulster Unionist Party chairman — the current chairman, as I understand it — who made the proposal for the Maze/Long Kesh site? Is the putative future

leader of the Ulster Unionists now contradicting his party chairman?

Mr M McGuinness: Far be it from me to cause any friction within the Ulster Unionist Party. I think that it has enough to deal with over the next couple of weeks.

William Irwin mentioned his concern that our commitment to the new stadiums is Belfast-centred. I remind the Member that the decisions were made by the individual sporting bodies of soccer and rugby and by the GAA, not by our Executive.

Reporting and monitoring delivery, which is of huge importance, came up. A significant number of Members raised the issue of how the delivery of PFG 2011-15 will be achieved and how cross-departmental working will be delivered. Delivery and outcomes are key priorities for the First Minister and me. Delivery plans, which will set out in more detail how each of the commitments will be delivered, including key milestones and indicators, will be at the heart of this. It is important to say that this is a new departure in monitoring progress against the Programme for Government. For the first time, we have a relatively small number of commitments, and we are asking Departments to produce detailed plans to demonstrate how they will achieve those commitments. This will improve accountability and, importantly, will offer the opportunity for earlier intervention where delivery slips.

The Programme for Government is predicated on the expectation that Departments will work together to achieve its outcomes. We intend to use the monitoring and management structures for the PFG to ensure that this co-operation occurs. For example, with the Delivering Social Change initiative, Ministers will direct cross-governmental action on children in poverty in a more comprehensive and systematic way.

The issue of social clauses was raised by Conor Murphy, Dolores Kelly, Mark Durkan and William Humphrey. I am happy to support the implementation of social clauses, as are the entire Executive. We need to have clear and consistent definitions, guidance and roll-out of social clauses, so we must do everything we can to ensure that investment benefits everyone in the community.

Social and affordable housing was raised by Alban Maginness. Alban made an important

point in relation to the potential for newbuild housing to stimulate not only the construction industry but the wider economy.

Anna Lo and Danny Kinahan raised important points about the environment, including climate change and, in particular, waste. There is a need to ensure that we reduce, reuse and recycle waste where possible. The commitments in the Programme for Government should be seen as flagships to focus efforts on delivery. There is nothing to stop the Department of the Environment going beyond the recycling, biodiversity and climate change targets. Indeed, I ask all Departments to develop broad business plans that include but are not limited to the Programme for Government commitments.

Health came up, and a number of Members raised the importance of health and health services. Many commitments in the Programme for Government will impact directly on this issue. There is a close correlation between deprivation and poor health. We need to tackle the root causes of ill health and help people to overcome poor health, particularly long-term or chronic conditions. Public health, chronic condition management and helping people to stay out of hospital will be critical.

George Robinson raised the issue of planning decisions on major projects. That is a critical measure in improving the competitiveness of our economy. What is required of a fit-for-purpose planning system is responsible, sustainable decision-making within in a sensible time frame.

A range of Members acknowledged the importance of education in the Programme for Government. There was a broad welcome for the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority. Barry McElduff highlighted the importance of higher and further education and listed a number of commitments in the Programme for Government. I fully recognise the importance of these issues. Education is central to improving the life opportunities of children and young people. I am grateful to the Member for raising the Lisanelly campus project. The First Minister and I are convinced that it could be a model of high-quality education provision, with schools working in partnership across sectors and in all parts of the community.

Colum Eastwood raised the issue of references to Ilex. It is important to state that the final

programme, like the draft programme, has several very tangible commitments to Derry, including development and support for the One Plan and financial support for the City of Culture. Ilex will be the first to recognise the importance of those commitments and the fact that no single organisation could hope to deliver them on its own. The Programme for Government is about people and outcomes, not lists of organisations.

Danny Kinahan and Stewart Dickson raised the issue of progress on CSI, which is central to our future as a society. It affects all aspects of social policy, and we are committed to addressing it. Therefore, as we reported earlier, we have established a cross-party working group to take the issue forward quickly on the basis of an agreed agenda. We will, of course, keep the House closely informed of progress.

Pat Doherty raised the issue of water infrastructure. We are pleased to have been able, in the current version of the Programme for Government, to increase investment from £600 million to £667 million. The Member referenced the important work to be done on reviewing the governance of Northern Ireland Water and the benefits that that will have for efficiency in that organisation. We agree, and we will make what improvements we can in that area.

Paul Givan and William Humphrey raised the issue of so-called peace walls. We acknowledge the impact and effect of those walls on our communities. It is a very complex issue. We will work to resolve the issues connected to the physical barriers in our communities in consultation with the communities that are most affected. Those who live on either side of the barriers must be central to any process of change.

Alban Maginness referred to the absence of any mention of the green new deal in the Programme for Government and raised concerns about our commitment to Europe. I remind the Member that the current four-year Budget contains provision for the green new deal initiative. In addition, the Programme for Government contains commitments to significant programmes of investment in energy efficiency and to targets to make further rapid progress on renewable energy expansion and, thereby, contribute to a strong sustainable economy. I also point to the Programme for Government commitment to draw down an initial

20% of EU funding over the coming period. Work is already under way on that target.

On North/South co-operation, I point Members to our commitment in the document to the importance of North/South links in helping us to deliver our priorities and to our commitment to developing those links through day-to-day contact between Administrations as well as formal structures such as the North/South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council. We have stated that we will work closely with the Irish Government in ways that are mutually advantageous.

I take this opportunity to assure Members of our commitment to retain free travel for older people.

On the point about whether or not we have consulted properly, I remind Members that the consultation process included over 430 consultation responses and 20 meetings with over 400 people. We have five brand new commitments: to facilitate the delivery of the Executive's 20% target for increased drawdown of competitive EU funds; to develop and implement a strategy to reduce economic inactivity through skills, training incentives and job creation; to introduce a package of measures aimed at improving safeguarding outcomes for children and vulnerable adults; to implement new structures to support the improved delivery of housing services to citizens; and to develop and implement a financial capability strategy for consumers. In addition, there have been significant enhancements to a number of commitments and improvements to many milestones. Among those are commitments to £1 billion investment in the economy; an increase in the value of manufacturing exports to 20% from 15%; an increase in visitor numbers to 4.2 million from 3.6 million; an increase in tourist revenue to £676 million from £625 million; and support for the successful hosting of the 2012 Irish Open and to build on that success to secure a further international golf event.

At this point, I want to echo the First Minister's thanks to the OFMDFM Committee. We also made a point of analysing the input from consultees throughout the process and provided regular reports to the Committee. That was good discipline, which, we believe, paid dividends in assisting the Committee to fulfil its scrutiny

role. I thank the Committee for all its work in that regard.

Obviously, people will be keenly interested in how the Assembly votes on the Programme for Government in the next few minutes. However, I want to put it on record that I am surprised and disappointed that SDLP Minister Alex Attwood could not find it in himself to attend last Thursday's crucial Executive meeting, which unanimously supported the Programme for Government. It also saddens me to say that I find it equally surprising that the leader of the SDLP, Alasdair McDonnell, could not —

Mrs D Kelly: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is totally disingenuous of the deputy First Minister to criticise the Minister of the Environment. He was in Brussels on official business.

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Bell: Further to that point of order, I thought that the Minister of the Environment told us that he was at a funeral. Was he at a funeral or was he in Brussels?

Mr Speaker: Order. Allow the deputy First Minister to continue.

Mr M McGuinness: I reiterate that it was a crucial meeting of the Executive to decide their approach to the Programme for Government, and I find it surprising and disappointing that the Minister of the Environment absented himself from that meeting. I wonder why. I also find it equally surprising —

Mr D Bradley: Will the deputy First Minister give way?

Mr M McGuinness: No, I will not give way. I find it equally surprising that the leader of the SDLP, Alasdair McDonnell, could not find the time to come to the Assembly today and contribute to our discussions on an issue that his party says it feels very strongly about. I know that the Ulster Unionists are about to decide who will be their next leader, but I have to say that I think the SDLP suffers from a leadership deficit. Such negativity from the SDLP towards the Executive is not lost on the electorate, who increasingly wonder how the SDLP can reconcile —

Mr D Bradley: Will the deputy Minister give way?

Mr M McGuinness: No, I will not give way.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Member should not persist.

Mr M McGuinness: Such negativity from the SDLP towards the Executive is not lost on the electorate, who increasingly wonder how the SDLP can reconcile its opposition to the major decisions of the Executive with its continuing involvement in the same Executive. It appears to me that the only message that the electorate can take from such an approach is that the SDLP is not just confused; it is divided.

With the privilege of agreeing a Programme for Government comes a tremendous responsibility to deliver real results. It is about leadership, and it is a responsibility that stretches beyond the Chamber. It is very much the people's programme. It is a programme for the people, reflecting the concerns of the people, and it will need to be delivered by the Executive in partnership with the people.

6.00 pm

We in government cannot make the fundamental changes that are required in our society without the help and consent of those who expect us to deliver the commitments in the Programme for Government. This represents a genuine challenge and opportunity to work across government and the business, statutory, community and voluntary sectors in society as a whole to deliver the transformation that is needed.

I commend the Programme for Government to the Assembly. It is a programme that articulates the key challenges facing us; it is a programme that provides a balanced range of commitments, centred on the economy and tackling disadvantage; it is a programme that resonates with the needs and wishes of the people; and it is a programme that sees the Executive working together for everyone. Important as the PFG is, however, as the famous business guru Peter Drucker once said, plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work.

I commend the Programme for Government to the House.

Question put.

The Assembly divided: Ayes 73; Noes 11.

AYES

Ms M Anderson, Mr S Anderson, Mr Bell, Mr Boylan, Ms Boyle, Ms P Bradley, Mr Brady, Mr Campbell, Mr T Clarke, Mr W Clarke, Mrs Cochrane, Mr Copeland, Mr Craig, Mr Cree,

Mr Dickson, Mr Doherty, Mr Douglas, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Dr Farry, Mr Flanagan, Mr Ford, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Girvan, Mr Givan, Mrs Hale, Mr Hamilton, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Kennedy, Mr Kinahan, Ms Lewis, Ms Lo, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McCallister, Mr F McCann, Ms J McCann, Mr McCarthy, Mr McCartney, Mr McCausland, Mr I McCrea, Mr McElduff, Mr M McGuinness, Mr D McIlveen, Miss M McIlveen, Mr McKay, Mr McLaughlin, Mr McMullan, Mr McQuillan, Mr A Maskey, Mr P Maskey, Mr Moutray, Mr Murphy, Mr Nesbitt, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr Ó hOisín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs Overend, Mr Poots, Ms S Ramsey, Mr G Robinson, Mr P Robinson, Mr Ross, Ms Ruane, Mr Storey, Mr Swann, Mr Weir, Mr Wells, Mr Wilson.

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

NOES

Mr Allister, Mr D Bradley, Mr Byrne, Mr Durkan, Mr Eastwood, Mrs D Kelly, Mr McDevitt, Mr McGlone, Mrs McKeivitt, Mr A Maginness, Mr P Ramsey.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Durkan and Mr Eastwood.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the Programme for Government 2011-15 agreed by the Executive.

6.15 pm

Ministerial Statement

Salmon Conservation in the DCAL Jurisdiction

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I am making this — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must leave the Chamber in an orderly fashion.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am making this statement to the Assembly today to update the House on actions that I have taken on salmon conservation in the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) jurisdiction. This is very much a live topic, and Members will recall the lively debate on 21 February this year on the sustainability of indigenous fish stocks. All Members who spoke agreed that salmon stocks are in a serious decline and that, without intervention, the future of this iconic species is under severe threat.

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

At the salmon summit in La Rochelle in France in October 2011, international scientists confirmed that wild Atlantic salmon are dying at sea in alarming numbers. Southern stock, including some in North America and Europe, are threatened with extinction. Long-term monitoring of the survival of salmon during the marine phase of their life cycle, which was conducted at the Department's Bushmills salmon station, shows a decline in salmon returning to the River Bush to spawn from around 30% prior to 1997 to less than 5% today.

In conjunction with the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), conservation limits have been established for a suite of rivers, which represent an index of the river types in the DCAL jurisdiction. These monitored rivers have failed to achieve the conservation limit in most years since 2002. North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO) guidelines state that fishing on stocks that are below the conservation limits should not be permitted. That applies equally to commercial netting and recreational angling. AFBI has also determined that licensed drift nets and bag nets that fish

for salmon off the County Antrim coast are intercepting mixed stocks of salmon from rivers monitored by DCAL as well as salmon from the Foyle catchment area.

Members will be aware that my Department wrote to the six commercial salmon netmen holding DCAL licences in 2011 asking them not to apply for 2012 licences. However, all six netmen had applied for the 2012 licences, requiring me to decide on their issue. My officials met with the salmon netmen at the end of February to advise them of the Department's position and to hear their views on voluntary salmon conservation measures for the 2012 season. After the meeting and subsequent communications, a number of the netmen have provided my Department with clear undertakings that they will not fish for salmon in 2012 if they are issued with licences.

After careful consideration of all the facts, I have decided to issue licences to those netmen who have provided undertakings to the Department not to fish. Given that we have assurances that the netmen will not fish in 2012, the Department considers that action to be consistent with its obligations under the EC habitats directive and with NASCO guidelines. Most importantly, it means that those nets will not be exploiting wild Atlantic salmon in 2012, which is a first step in our efforts to conserve this iconic species.

In an attempt to reach a mutually acceptable resolution to the matter at this time, my officials are continuing to liaise with those netmen who have not yet provided a suitable undertaking and who will not, therefore, be issued with a licence. I also recently called on anglers to adopt the practice of catch and release when angling for salmon during the 2012 season. Current legislation does not readily enable the introduction of further restrictions on the taking of salmon in time for the opening of the fishing season, and, consequently, voluntary measures are the best option available to minimise the killing of salmon by anglers in 2012. This is an interim step to allow the Department to consult on how to contribute to the long-term sustainability of wild Atlantic salmon stocks.

Early indications are encouraging, with a significant number of angling clubs and anglers expressing their support for my call for voluntary catch and release for salmon. To reinforce that call, my Department is taking the lead by

introducing catch and release only for salmon in all DCAL public angling estate waters. It is now a condition of sale for all DCAL game fishing permits that any salmon caught be returned to the water unharmed.

The Loughs Agency has made a declaration, under the Foyle Area (Control of Fishing) Regulations 2010, that netting is suspended on the River Foyle, Lough Foyle and seaward of Lough Foyle and that angling on the River Finn is restricted to catch and release only for the 2012 season. The Loughs Agency supports and echoes the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure's request for all anglers to practise catch-and-release methods for salmon and sea trout. The Department is asking anglers to fly-fish only, using single barbless hooks to minimise damage to fish. We also ask anglers to avoid more harmful methods, such as worming and shrimping and the use of treble hooks. That will be closely monitored by the Department's fishery protection officers, and it is expected that all permit holders will comply with the condition. I am aware of a significant number of private fishery owners who have voluntarily agreed to use catch-and-release methods only. I commend them for their decision and, again, encourage others to follow suit.

I thank the House for the opportunity to update Members on these actions. I will keep the House informed of progress on the conservation and protection of salmon stocks in the DCAL jurisdiction.

Miss M McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure):

The Committee recognises that conservation measures must be taken to ensure the future sustainability of salmon. The Committee wrote to the Minister to ensure that all stakeholders in the process are treated equitably and that the conservation measures adopted by the Department are fair, balanced, enforceable, open and transparent. The Committee is pleased that conversations took place with the netmen. That resulted in some, if not all, of them voluntarily agreeing not to fish during the 2012 season in order to give the Department time to fully consult on measures for the longer-term sustainability of salmon. What assurances has the Minister received that the actions that she and her Department have taken will meet the obligations of the EC directive and will result in financial penalties being avoided?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. The Committee Chair is right in saying that she sent a letter on behalf of the Committee, which, I believe, all the Committee agreed with, calling for a considered approach to make sure that there was equity among all anglers. I am pleased that the approach that my Department and I have taken has been acknowledged. I have received assurances that our actions are compliant with the EU directives, NASCO guidelines and, indeed, the salmon management plan. To be honest, I think that this is the best way forward: all anglers, recreational and commercial, not fishing for salmon during the 2012 season.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for her detailed and comprehensive statement. Can she tell us what action could be taken by the EU if the Department does not take appropriate steps to conserve wild Atlantic salmon stocks?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As was outlined in the debate on 21 February, non-compliance with the EU habitats directive or the water framework directive could result in proceedings against us. There has been mention that we could incur significant fines of £350,000 daily. Given the assurances that we have received, I am happy that we are complying with those directives and that we are meeting our responsibilities in respect of salmon conservation. I just want to repeat this point: there will be no fishing for salmon during 2012. As a result, I think that we will meet our obligations to Europe.

Mr Swann: I welcome the Minister's statement and the fact that DCAL waters will be catch and release only. I thank the Minister for making that clear at this stage. The statement quashes the rumours that she intended to close rivers, which I think would have been unhelpful to everybody. So, again, I thank her for that. I can see her smiling because I am sure that she did not think that I would thank her as much.

Of the six netsmen involved, it is obvious now that some of them have not agreed not to put down nets. Can she indicate how many netsmen are still holding out? What monitoring will now go ahead in areas where netsmen have agreed voluntarily to stop fishing? What infraction penalties will she put in place if her Department finds that nets have been put down? Will she actually revoke licences? Does the Department foresee any legal action from not issuing licences?

Ms Ní Chuilín: There were quite a lot of questions. I was not smiling because the Member thanked me; I was smiling because he wants to hear the rumours that I have heard about things that I will do.

Mr Swann: I have heard worse.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am sure you have. I am sure that you are not responsible for any of them.
[Laughter.]

All joking aside; the Member asked some questions, all of which are valuable. I will get back to him in writing about what will happen if the netsmen who have agreed not to fish have broken the terms under which their licences have been issued. Therefore, I will get back to the Member with that information.

Four of the six netsmen have given us assurances with which we are happy. The other two netsmen have given us assurances that we do not feel are robust enough yet. I believe that they are genuine in their approach to salmon conservation. We are working towards a resolution. I am optimistic. Given the history of people on the waters and shores, the backgrounds from which those people come and, in fairness, their commitment to salmon conservation, I am hopeful that a resolution can be achieved for all six netsmen, rather than for four of the six.

I will get back to the Member on the other questions that he asked after I have checked the Hansard report.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I remind Members to confine their enthusiasm to one question.

Mrs McKeivitt: I welcome the Minister's statement this evening. Given the fact that her officials did not meet the netsmen until the end of February, is she happy with the Department's consultation process?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials met the netsmen throughout the consultation period. The difficulty was meeting six different netsmen in the build up to this statement. It was a matter of suiting the netsmen rather than officials simply sitting there. It is not fair to portray officials as inactive or, even, relaxed about the issue; far from it.

For the record, DCAL officials who have been looking after fisheries have been inundated. They have been doing a very good job. They have been fair in their dealings with netsmen and,

indeed, with all anglers. In fact, that feedback has come to me from anglers and, indeed, the netsmen. I believe that the four netsmen who have agreed not to fish would be quite pleased with the levels of consultation that they have had. If they were not pleased, I do not believe that we would have reached a resolution. We are still optimistic and pursuing the other two netsmen. Hopefully, they, too, will find a resolution to the issue.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement, which at least confirms, once again, how serious the situation is with regard to salmon stocks. Three per cent of salmon returning to the River Bush is an incredibly low figure.

Has there been any discussion, investigation or recognition of the connection, which is widely perceived, between the proliferation of salmon farms and the reduction in the wild salmon population? There is a feeling that escapees from salmon farms are polluting the genuine bloodlines of wild salmon and that this is part of the effect of all that.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He may recall from the debate on 21 February that Members brought research that spoke of the concerns that he has raised. That concern, in conjunction with others, such as overfishing for salmon, the state of river beds and river pollution, has led to that huge reduction. I am sure that there are many other reasons that AFBI and others have brought forward. At the end of the day, as the Member said, it is a serious situation.

6.30 pm

In order for us to regenerate our towns and villages and to increase tourism, it is important that the angling estate is fit for purpose and that we do everything that we can to make sure that that is the case. This is one in a series of steps that we hope to take. The Member is right. He raised one area of concern but there are many others.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's statement. I was going to ask about the late departmental communications with some of the stakeholders, but the Minister has answered that question. What discussions have taken place with other jurisdictions on this crucial issue, and particularly with those jurisdictions that share Irish Sea waters? What information can be shared?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The salmon summit in France in October was attended by representatives from Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Britain and Norway. I think that all the countries with surrounding waters attended that summit. There is a general and widespread acceptance that our salmon stocks are at a serious level, and each jurisdiction has a responsibility to bring forward salmon management plans. Those discussions are ongoing, and any updates that we receive from the summit will be fed through to the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure in the first instance. Although we have responsibility for and can take steps to ensure the conservation of salmon, it is incumbent on other jurisdictions to do likewise.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas sin. I welcome the statement that, as Mr Swann said earlier, clears the water. I also welcome the fact the Foyle fishery has been included in the plans. If the catch-and-release system was fully complied with and the voluntary suspension of the nets remained in place for 2012, what would that mean, in real terms, for the numbers of fish that would potentially not be caught and could thereby go back into the river systems? In other words, how many fish were caught last year that could potentially get through this year to spawn in the winter?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I know that the Member is a keen angler. I was delighted that there had been no fishing puns, but you were the first to introduce them, Cathal. There are two sets of figures. If the Member is referring to the figures for angling, the total number of fish caught by rod in the DCAL area in 2010 was 1,474 and a similar number — 1,619 — were caught by rod in 2009. I will supply the other figures for commercial fishing in writing.

Mrs Hale: I thank the Minister for her statement. Will the Minister inform the House whether the growing scourge of poaching and illegal netting, which threatens not only fish stocks but the lives of public officials, is being treated as a priority by the Department?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I assure the Member that it is absolutely a priority. That issue was raised during the debate in February, it has been also raised in Assembly questions and there has been some media coverage about it. I am concerned that our protection and enforcement

officers should be allowed to do their jobs in safety. I believe that they are doing a good job. If Members have information about any gaps in cover or in the enforcement presence, we would appreciate that being brought forward. The Member's concern was whether we were treating that as a priority, and we are. We are also going to do our best to ensure that those who are out doing a good job are protected.

Mrs Overend: If the netsmen decided to put down their nets again in 2013, what would be the consequences under the EU habitats directive? Would DCAL still be liable to infraction fines? The Department has 11 bailiffs. Will the Minister give any further support to the voluntary club bailiffs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will deal with the Member's last point first. I will get back to her in writing because I am not sure how many bailiffs there are or where they are. I am hearing about different clubs coming forward, which is very welcome, because those people love the rivers and love their fishing, and DCAL needs to support them where possible.

The Member asked about 2013, but I am dealing with 2012, and I hope that, straight after this statement, we will go out to consultation to determine what we need to do in addition to the requirements of the 1966 Fisheries Act and the EU habitats directive guidelines. I hope that we can all use the consultation period to engage constructively.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an ráiteas atá déanta aici ar chaomhnú bradáin sa dlí seo. I thank the Minister for her statement on salmon conservation. Considering the fact that, according to her statement, there has been a decline in the rate of salmon returning to spawn from 30% in 1997 to 5% at present, can she assure us that the measures that she intends to introduce are not a case of lifting the nets when the fish have gone? Will she further assure us that those measures will have a positive effect on fish numbers, considering the fact that, according to her statement, the problem really lies out deep in the Atlantic?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. First, it is to be welcomed that there will be no salmon fishing through 2012. It is anticipated that this will provide breathing space for increasing salmon stocks, which

will be closely monitored during the period. It makes sense that when we do not have huge commercial fishing taking most of the salmon away, those salmon should be sustained.

What happens beyond that? What conservation measures are we taking? That is what is at the bottom of the Member's second question; if it is not, he can come back to me in writing and I will happily give him whatever information I have. We are taking a number of additional measures because it is not just about taking the nets out. It is about what else DCAL is doing. It is also about making sure that, for example, we could adopt additional salmon conservation measures that are informed by robust scientific evidence and the stakeholder consultation that we are going into.

We could also introduce further temporal restrictions by limiting the times when salmon may be caught. We could, for example, as part of the consultation, suggest shortening the fishing season. The Department could also consider restricting the numbers of salmon being caught, by introducing quotas on a daily or seasonal basis. Indeed, as I said during the debate on 21 February, we could consider no one catching salmon at all. However, I am sure that during the consultation, there will be other suggestions about how we preserve salmon.

Mr I McCrea: The Minister has referred to the consultation period that she hopes will commence following her statement. Will she assure the House that those who are totally opposed to the nets, many of whom are, no doubt, watching this debate online at the moment, will be part of that consultation and that their views will be taken into consideration?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The consultation is open to everyone. Even though some people who are anglers may have a stronger voice and bigger representation than others, the consultation has to be open to everyone, including some of the state agencies and Departments that have responsibility for the loughs and the rivers. I do not want to predetermine what the consultation will look like but I hope that it will include local government, which is ideally situated to take forward, assist and facilitate consultations, particularly when there are groups that may not have as great a degree of experience as others. It is important that everyone not only takes part in the consultation but is constructive. It is not

just about people saying, "We do not like this" or, "We like that".

If people do not like something, they need to come forward with alternatives. I think that everyone can agree, regardless of what they think, that we have demonstrated that we have been listening and that we have acted and have been seen to give reasonable evidence and strong assurances. We will continue to do that, and the consultation, which will be forthcoming, is another opportunity to do that.

Mr Frew: What additional resources will be put in place in the Department's Bushmills salmon station on the River Bush, which is in my constituency of North Antrim, to assist in the research for that important fish species? Will that research be commissioned wider to include the River Bann, Lough Neagh and all the feeder rivers, including the Maine, the Braid and the Kellswater rivers?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I do not have the information to hand but I will get it to him. I was going to say that you need to widen the net, but that is really cheesy. You need to cover as many of the waters as possible because our rivers do not stop but all interflow into each other. Benefits for one need to be felt by the others. I will get back to the Member in writing.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the Minister's statement and I congratulate her on the way that she has listened to fishing interests. I particularly welcome the Loughs Agency's decision relating to the Foyle system. Is the Minister content that there will be enough bailiffs on the Foyle system to police and protect what she has brought in?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of the consultation on salmon preservation, our officials in the Foyle and Carlingford areas are in regular discussion and contact with each other. It is important that, coming into the fishing season, our rivers and loughs are protected. As the Member may have heard previously, it is also important not only that the rivers are protected but that people who enforce our legislation on those rivers are protected.

Mr Allister: Given that the Minister told me on 30 January that I was wrong to suggest that she had any powers to withhold net licences, I welcome the journey that she has made. Will she give us an assurance that she will be resolute in refusing to issue licences to the two

outstanding netmen who have not agreed, if they continue to take that position, and that she will not back down?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The two netmen who have not been issued with licences will not get their licences unless the assurances that they provide are as robust as the assurances that the other four netmen provided. If those assurances are not strong, they will not get a licence. That is very clear.

Executive Committee Business

Superannuation Bill: First Stage

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to introduce the Superannuation Bill [NIA 6/11-15], which is a Bill to make provision for and in connection with limiting the value of the benefits which may be provided under so much of any scheme under Article 3 of the Superannuation (Northern Ireland) Order 1972 as provides by virtue of Article 4(2) of that Order for benefits to be provided by way of compensation to or in respect of persons who suffer loss of office or employment; and to make provision about the procedure for modifying such a scheme.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

As Members will be aware, the Rates (Regional Rates) Order is introduced annually and stems from the Executive's agreed Budget, which was brought to the Assembly in March 2011. That Budget covers a four-year period from 2011 to 2015. Members will be aware that the regional rate supplements Northern Ireland's share of relevant public expenditure and is a key component of the Executive's annual Budget, which was last debated in this Assembly on 14 February.

6.45 pm

The regional rate provides in the region of an extra 6% over and above the Barnett settlement, and that will help to fund departmental expenditure on hospitals, roads, schools and other essential services. The regional rate represents just over half of the typical rates bill, and the other half is made up of district rates that are set independently by local councils. Councils have undertaken significant work this year to keep district rates as low as possible, and the average district rate will increase by around 2.4%. As part of our four-year Budget, it has been agreed that the regional rate will be frozen in real terms until 2014-15, and that will provide certainty and stability for businesses and households to plan and manage their finances. Real term corrects for the effects of inflation, and we are using the Treasury gross domestic product (GDP) deflator.

The legislation before you today for approval is a simple outworking of that important Budget decision. It will fix two regional rates in the pound for 2012-13: one for households and one for business ratepayers. This year's order provides for a small increase, 2.2%, in the regional rate for the 2012-13 rating year for both households and businesses. That means that, in this coming year, rates bills overall will increase by an average of around 2.3%.

The Executive are committed to ensuring that household and commercial budgets are protected, given the continuing economic difficulties being faced across the board.

Contrast that with the average rise of over 10% in the domestic regional rate across the last four years of direct rule. This order, therefore, represents the best that we can do to balance the interests of ratepayers and the demands of public expenditure. Surprisingly, I have had submissions to my office recently from people who claim that the regional rate should be increased by much more than the 2.2% provided for by this order. That, however, begs the question of where ratepayers would find the additional money at this difficult time. Although we want more resources to be available to the Executive, many households and businesses are finding things increasingly difficult. Holding the regional rate constant in cash terms also complements the commercial rating measures that the Assembly approved last month. I am glad to report to the Assembly that the legislation received Royal Assent recently, and the measures will be introduced from the start of next month.

I will not go into the detail of this again, but I can confirm that under the expanded small business rate relief scheme, an extra 8,300 business ratepayers will find their new rate bills reduced by 20% in the coming year. In addition, the Executive have agreed to hold manufacturing rates at 30%, which will help around 4,500 manufacturing business. That economic support measure is unique to Northern Ireland. It is also worth noting that while rate bills for business ratepayers in the rest of the UK are pegged at a rate of inflation as well, their calculations are based on the higher retail price index at September each year. As a result, business rates in other parts of the UK will increase by 5.6% in April — more than double the increase locally.

In the domestic sector, decisions taken by this Executive and Assembly have ensured that domestic ratepayers in Northern Ireland continue to have the lowest household bills in any part of the United Kingdom. As Members are aware, the modest increase for domestic ratepayers is well below the trend for the past decade, particularly for the last period of direct rule. Members will recall the enormous 19% hike in the domestic regional rate that was forced on households in 2006. In addition, households have benefited from the Executive decision to defer water charges.

We also have better targeted rate reliefs and allowances compared with the council tax in

England. The average household in Northern Ireland is much better off than in other parts of the UK in local taxes and charges, and certainly much better off than we would have been under direct rule. The average domestic rate bill in 2012-13 will be around £255 lower than it would have been had the increases of the last years of direct rule taken place. Since 2008, that cumulative saving has been in the region of £775.

Should there be any naysayers in the House — I do not think there will be at this stage, but you never know — let me say this: rebalancing the economy during the continuing downturn and through to recovery means keeping money in the pockets of businesses and consumers. We will not dip into those pockets any more than is necessary until we have made all the savings there are to be made in delivering efficient and effective regional government and public services. Devolution has allowed us to do that and to do things differently in Northern Ireland.

Of course, there are limits to the concessions we can make locally and still raise enough money to help to pay for essential public services. I say that because, every month, someone with a worthy cause comes along, asking for more or for an exemption. This month, it has been ghost estates. Last month, it was town centres. The month before, it was sports clubs. The month before that, it was the equine industry. We have to be realistic, otherwise we will end up playing spot the ratepayer, because nobody will be paying any rates.

It is a local taxation system, not a benefit system. If sectors need supporting, we should look to other ways of doing that, rather than immediately jumping to the conclusion that the rating system is the best vehicle for delivering help and, somehow, is not real money. Any revenue foregone is less money for public expenditure here. That said, to date, I believe that the Executive and Assembly have taken a very measured and balanced approach to the whole area, and, as a result, we have a better rating system in place than the one that we inherited after direct rule. That has been achieved only because of cross-party support secured through this Assembly and the previous one. It represents a real success for this Administration.

My next move to improve the system will be to secure Executive agreement as soon as

possible to undertake a non-domestic general revaluation, taking effect from April 2015. That cannot wait any longer, even though the commercial property market is still weak and uncertain. The system is simply too important, and fairness has to be maintained and restored. To underline its significance, Members will be aware that we have just passed the £1 billion mark for rate receipts, regional and domestic rate, domestic and non-domestic. Taken together, the domestic and commercial regional rate will raise up to £606 million in the next rating year.

Finally, to move on to more technical matters, the order specifies the rate poundage for 2012-13. Article 1 sets out the title of the order and gives the operational date as the day after it is affirmed by the Assembly. Article 2 provides that the order will apply for the 2012-13 rating year through to 31 March 2013, and article 3 specifies 32.15p in the pound as the commercial regional poundage and 0.3780p in the pound as the domestic regional rate poundage. I look forward to hearing Members' comments, and I commend the order to the Assembly.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle, Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. The 2011-15 Budget, which was agreed by the previous Assembly on 7 March 2011, proposed that both domestic and non-domestic regional rates should be uplifted only in line with inflation. The purpose of today's rule is to set the rate of uplift for 2012-13. The policy proposals contained in the statutory rule were considered by the Committee on 1 February 2012. The Committee noted that the regional rates increase set out in the proposals amounted to a 2.2% uplift, which is less than the rate of inflation by either the retail or the consumer price index. The Department clarified that the reason was that it reflected the GDP deflator at the time at which the Budget was agreed. The Committee had no issues to raise in respect of those policy proposals at that time.

The Committee formally considered the statutory rule that is before the Assembly today on 29 February, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly's Examiner of Statutory Rules, which had no points to raise by way of technical scrutiny of the rule. The Committee agreed to recommend that the Rates

(Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2012 be affirmed by the Assembly. Therefore, I support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I support the motion. In doing so, I want to outline some points of significance, including the fact that, as was alluded to, we have set a 2.2% increase for the year 2012-13. I compare that to what has happened in the rest of the UK, where the rate has been set at 5.6%. That is because they have used the consumer price index, which has a different calculation and will come out with a higher rate.

We have used an imaginative process; we can increase by up to 6% on the Barnett settlement through the rates process. As was stated by the Minister, the regional rate component makes up just over 50% of the rates bill that the general public will receive. Another advantage is that up to 8,300 small businesses will get the advantage of the 20% reduction by setting the rateable value at £10,000 as opposed to the £5,000 settlement that was there previously. There is a greater benefit to a number of small businesses.

The order will give the general public some sense of budgeting. They will know where we stand because we have set the Budget forward to 2014 and 2015. On that basis, we have said that we will follow the pricing structure. I have noticed that some figures state that it will go up to 2.7% for the following two years, but it is 2.2% this year for the regional rate. I support the motion.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Chairman of the Committee and Mr Girvan for their contributions to the debate. As I do regularly, I thank the Committee for the way in which it has scrutinised the legislation and for its support. I re-emphasise the points that have been made: this is a good deal for ratepayers in Northern Ireland. As the Member for South Antrim pointed out, it is more than 50% lower than the increase in the rest of the United Kingdom. It comes after a period in which we froze rates, and it comes with all the rates relief that we give to small businesses, the manufacturing industry, lone pensioners and low-income families. There is a whole range of other ways in which we seek to support people at this particularly difficult time. Therefore, I hope that it will be recognised as a good-news story by the people whom I described earlier as the naysayers. My colleague from North Down felt that I was talking about those who were involved in the equine industry when I

talked about the naysayers, but that is his form of humour.

Mr Weir: Frank Carson is spinning in his grave.

Mr Wilson: Yes, he is.

I hope that it will be noted that we have sought to alleviate the burden for local ratepayers. I commend the order to the Assembly.

Mr Deputy Speaker: As section 63 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 applies to the motion, it requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

7.00 pm

Rates (Microgeneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): I beg to move

That the Rates (Microgeneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

This order is essentially a harmonising measure that brings practice in Northern Ireland into line with that in the rest of the UK. It also serves to align this particular rating policy with the Executive's Programme for Government and the strategic energy framework. The order will ensure that the installation of microgeneration equipment at business premises — for example, solar panels, wind turbines and ground-source heat pumps — does not increase rates bills. As a result, commercial ratepayers who make such improvements to their premises between now and the next revaluation, in 2015, will see no change in their current rates bill, all other things being equal.

The measure has its origins in the 2008 Budget, when the Government announced a range of measures to promote sustainable growth. Included in those measures was one relating to occupiers of commercial premises and the issue of business rates acting as a disincentive to the installation of microgeneration equipment, as doing so could increase rates bills.

The legislation has been implemented in the rest of the United Kingdom, as it was enacted to coincide with the general revaluation there. Members will know that we could not proceed with a revaluation here, so this harmonising measure did not get introduced. I do not think that we should wait until 2015, when the next revaluation here is planned, to get this on the statute book. All that the order does is ensure that any increase in liability due to investment in microgeneration equipment is disregarded for the life of the valuation list.

As part of the process of bringing the order to the Assembly for approval, a targeted consultation was carried out, including the Northern Ireland Local Government Association. No comments were received, and there was no objection to the proposals.

The measures in the order will result in negligible costs to business, while the delay in bringing

forward the measure has not disadvantaged anyone in the business community. Put simply, to date, Land and Property Services has not had cause to separately assess the value of any of this equipment, so there is nothing yet to be disregarded. Therefore, the measure does not have a significant cost. It is, though, about aligning policy and providing the right signals to business that the Executive and Assembly support investments that help to conserve energy resources.

It is a modest measure, and I expect that it will have only a minor impact at the moment. However, as we look ahead, it may become more significant. I do not wish to put Northern Ireland businesses at a disadvantage to those in the rest of the UK. The order will amend the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 to provide that, to the extent that plant or machinery has microgeneration capacity, such capacity is not taken into account in a valuation for rating purposes.

Article 1 contains the citation and commencement provisions. Article 2 inserts a definition of “microgeneration capacity” in article 2(2) of the 1977 order and amends paragraph 3 of Part III of schedule 12 to that order. That dispenses with the detail of the order.

I look forward to hearing Members’ comments. I commend the order to the Assembly.

Mr Murphy (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance and Personnel): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his opening remarks. As he said, the purpose of the order is to include a definition of “microgeneration capacity” in the 1977 order and to amend the appropriate classes in schedule 12 to that order. Plants or machinery in compliance with this definition of “microgeneration capacity” will not be assessed for rates in accordance with the current valuation list.

The policy proposals in this statutory rule were considered by the Committee on 28 September 2011. At that time, the Committee had no issues to raise in respect of those policy proposals. The Committee formally considered the statutory rule before the Assembly today at its meeting on 29 February, together with the accompanying report from the Assembly’s Examiner of Statutory Rules, which raised no issues by way of technical scrutiny.

The Committee agreed to recommend that the Rates (Microgeneration) Order (NI) 2012 be affirmed by the Assembly. I, therefore, support the motion.

Mr Girvan: I thank the Minister for bringing this forward, and, as the Chair of the Committee has indicated, the order came before the Committee just for noting and considering.

In relation to microgeneration, a lot of people have wrong ideas about these things. I, for one, when I first looked at the order, thought it was to do with microregeneration. However, it is definitely microgeneration. In dealing with wind turbines and that type of equipment, including solar panels, and how the biomass generation process could benefit a business by reducing its energy bill, there is advantage in coming into line with what has been approved and is in force in the rest of the United Kingdom. I do not see there being much controversy in putting this forward. As alluded to, it seems that very little cost will be attributed to it. We should ensure that it is included as a sector in the 2015 revaluation process and given a categorisation so that it can be looked at by Land and Property Services. I support the motion.

Mr Cree: As the Chairman of the Committee said, this matter was discussed at some length in Committee and found unanimous support. It makes sense, because it will encourage people in small businesses and, perhaps, larger ones to support alternative energies. That gives a greater prospect of carbon reduction and cost savings, which is what we are all aiming for. It will also help us to meet some of our Programme for Government targets. Last but by no means least, it brings us into line with the legislation in other parts of the United Kingdom. I fully support the motion.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, am grateful for the opportunity to speak to the order. Given its technical nature and the merit within it, I will keep my commentary short.

The Minister and others have already outlined for us the details that serve to underpin this directive, but, in effect, the order also has the potential to do two things: first, to encourage our society to use and embrace renewable energy, thus reducing our demand for fossil fuels; and, secondly, to positively impact on our environment. In the past, Northern Ireland has been shown to be lagging when it comes to green economy issues. We should look to

the examples set by others as an illustration of how beneficial and valuable an earnest green economy can be both to industry and to the labour market.

The provisions in the order are a small step in the right direction, allowing for plant and machinery with the capacity for microgeneration to be excluded from rating valuations. Therefore, it gives due recognition to the potential value of microgeneration as part of our overall economic recovery. I hope that, beyond offering support to this financial olive branch to the green industry, the provisions can go on to serve as a catalyst for more serious consideration and resources being awarded to the green economy as we look to the future. A green economy will not just create jobs and investment but will help to cut our carbon emissions, improve our environment and, ultimately, improve our quality of life. I support the order.

Mr Wilson: I thank the Members who have taken part in the debate. I thank the Chairman and Committee for their support and Mr Girvan, Mr Cree and Mrs Cochrane for their comments in support of the order.

I will just clear up a couple of things. This is not designed to encourage anyone to do anything; it is simply to avoid a situation where they may be discouraged by the possibility of having property revalued upwards because they have installed some microgeneration plant. However, I have made it clear that, to date, despite the fact that some people have installed such measures in their property, there has been no upward revaluation of any property. That is why it does not represent a huge cost; the cost is negligible.

I was told not to rise to the bait, but I have to respond to the points that Mrs Cochrane made. First of all, this is not likely to be a measure that will, in any way, significantly save the planet, bring down carbon emissions or stop temperatures rising. When one considers that 10,000 massive 400-foot wind turbines would be able to produce probably somewhere under 10% of our total electricity, if they were to operate efficiently, and reduce our carbon emissions by 0.3% for the United Kingdom as a whole, in that context a couple of solar panels on a roof or heat-collecting things in the ground or whatever it happens to be —

Mr Hamilton: Heat source pumps.

Mr Wilson: Heat source pumps in the ground are hardly likely to make a significant difference. All that this is about is ensuring that people are not in any way disadvantaged by having the rateable valuation of their property increased when they decide to spend money on those things, and it keeps us in line with the rest of the United Kingdom.

I would not like Members to think that I am one of these snake oil salesmen who suggest that this is a way to save the planet. I do not want Members to think that by doing this, somehow or other we will have saved the planet in 50 years. I accept, however, that some businesses will, hopefully, make a commercial decision that some of these measures will help them to conserve energy or reduce their energy bills and make them more competitive. If they make that investment, at least we will not stand in their way. Therefore, I ask that Members support this measure.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Minister, your comments certainly generated heat in the Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Rates (Microgeneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be affirmed.

Adjourned at 7.13 pm.



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