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The Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, Belfast BT4 3XX.
Tel: 028 9052 1135 · e-mail: simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk

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Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 11 November 2013

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Matters of the Day

Bomb Attack: Retired Police Officer

Mr Speaker: Ross Hussey has been given leave to make a statement on the attempted bomb attack on a retired police officer, which fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should rise in their place continually. The key word is "continually". All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter. Members know by now that there will be no points of order or any other business discussed until this item of business is finished.

Mr Hussey: I, along with many Members, have just returned from a service of commemoration for those who made the ultimate sacrifice in service to their Queen and country. Today, 11 November, is Remembrance Day, and we remember all those who lost their life in service to the Crown. But for the vigilance of a former police officer, we could be remembering him here as well. A republican organisation deemed it appropriate to attempt to murder a former member of the police. Not only did it attempt to murder a former police officer, it also could have murdered his 12-year-old daughter. This was an act of cowardice. It was an act that everyone in this House should condemn unreservedly.

If we look at the history of the car bomb, and we look at the history of those who planted under-car booby traps, we can see a direct link to the Provisional IRA. In my opinion, those who planted this bomb have a direct link to that organisation. Someone once said, "They haven't gone away, you know." It is quite clear to all of us that they have not gone away, and they are still here. Having watched that former police officer go to and from his normal daily activities, they would have known that his 12-year-old daughter could have been in the car. What will her mental state be over the next few months as she thinks about what could have happened? What will her father's mental state

be when he thinks that those people were prepared not only to murder him but to murder a 12-year-old child?

I have said before that not one sod of Ireland is worth the life of anybody. For somebody who was prepared to serve their country as a police officer and is now retired to be a target, what does that say about the peace process, and what does that say about republicans who engage in these activities? I condemn them unreservedly, and I ask that this House calls on anyone who has any information on those individuals to report it immediately to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

There is supposedly a code in the IRA whereby it keeps its secrets to itself, and it has done that very well since 1998, but it is about time that that code was broken, and it is about time that the people who are attempting to bring Northern Ireland to its knees and to kill innocent civilians and children should wise up and go away. If you have any information on them, I suggest that goes immediately to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. My sympathies are with that police officer and his family.

Mr Newton: I join with Mr Hussey in his condemnation of the attack on the police officer. Indeed, there is no sense in politicians from all sides in this Chamber condemning it; it is really the condemnation of wider society that is important. I believe that wider society in Northern Ireland has condemned these acts of terrorism and will continue to do so. It was not only an attack on that family. It was an attack on him because of how he has chosen to earn his living; he has chosen to serve society in a meaningful way and to play a very positive role in society. For that, he was singled out and identified in the minds of those who carry out such acts, as in the past, as some form of legitimate target.

Not only did they attack that man and his daughter, they attacked wider society. Society wants to move on, but those who skulk around in the darkness and those who have evil in their hearts want to drag us back to those days when

it was common to turn on the news bulletin and listen to incidents about bullets and bombs and murder and mayhem. Well, society is not going back there, and it will not be led back by those who are prepared to carry out such cowardly and evil acts of violence. It is only thanks to Almighty God that that man's life was saved. His life and the life of his young daughter were saved by his vigilance.

The people of Northern Ireland want to move forward to build a successful economy and to build a standard and quality of life that all our citizens can enjoy. They want to do that by addressing the jobs issue to bring prosperity to Northern Ireland, tackling the health and education issues that are important to society and building a positive Northern Ireland that we can all be proud of. Indeed, the future of our children and older people — not bombs, bullets, murder and mayhem — has to be the priority.

Mr G Kelly: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I rise to speak, if we can, with a single voice coming out from the Assembly to condemn this attack on a retired police officer and his 12-year-old daughter. Anyone with information should bring it forward.

There is no rhyme, reason or logic that can stand over an attack on the PSNI. In this case, we have a man who has retired and who is trying to get on with his life. Perhaps people will still try to put out some sort of reason for this attack. There is no reason. I agree with the Member who has just spoken. The whole of society wants to move on. This is trying to prevent the whole community from moving on and, indeed, trying to draw us back into a past from which we have moved on. I join with other Members in condemning this unreservedly.

Dr McDonnell: May I, on my behalf and on behalf of the SDLP, and I know that it is a sentiment shared by the whole House, send our sympathy, unconditional support and thoughts to this man and his family?

This attack has to be condemned outright, totally and absolutely. This type of vicious attack has no place in our society, going forward. In my opinion, from the little I know, this act of violence has little or nothing to do with any sort of meaningful politics or, dare I say, republicanism. It has got to do with an insanity that, somehow or other, killing a neighbour — a fellow countryman, a fellow human being — will benefit anyone. Violence, threats of violence, killing and threats of killing have no place in our society and will not be tolerated by any of us.

I am glad that we have a unanimous approach across the House this morning, and I thank the Member for bringing this forward and giving us all an opportunity to place on the record our absolute revulsion at this attack or, indeed, any other attack of this nature that might take place.

Mrs Cochrane: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I join others who have spoken to condemn the attempted murder of the former police officer and his family. My best wishes are with the family at this time. Yesterday, my colleague Naomi Long MP called with the family to pass on our thoughts. Understandably, they are distressed.

This attack was a couple of streets away from my home, and the device was discovered prior to the gentleman taking his daughter to school. Indeed, I came across the incident having done the school run. To target someone in that way, in a built-up area, with no consideration for who else could have been injured, or worse, is beyond contempt. Those who planted the device are utterly reckless and have absolutely nothing to offer Northern Ireland. It was an attack not only on the former policeman, but on the whole community. Every right-thinking person will condemn it.

We need to work together to build a peaceful future where we will no longer see this type of attack. I encourage everyone in the community to work alongside the police in order to bring those people to justice.

Mr McCallister: Like everyone else in the House who has spoken, I rise to condemn this awful, awful attack and incident, which could have caused absolute carnage in a family. The fear that that instils in the community and in serving and former police officers is appalling.

The message coming from the Assembly is loud and clear: they have nothing to offer; there is no future for these people; nobody wants them or their cowardly acts. Mrs Cochrane made the point. This is a situation that many of us face with young families and children. We can all envisage the absolute horror of what this poor family faces. Our thoughts, sympathies and prayerful support are with the family. It will be important that they know that the House is fully behind them and supporting them with whatever help we can be. Anyone with information should, and must, contact the police immediately and give that information.

I thank Mr Hussey for tabling the matter of the day, because I think that it is important that that message goes from this place very loudly and strongly.

12.15 pm

Mr Allister: I join in unreservedly condemning this further terrorist attack in our midst and the attempt to bring murder to the very heart of a family. I condemn it from the context, personally, of having condemned all terrorism: it was never justified and is still not justified. I hear Mr Kelly today condemning it, yet unable and unwilling to condemn like incidents from the past when perpetrated by the IRA. Rather, he was in the business of justifying those.

This incident brings home to us a timely reminder of the sheer heartless approach of terrorists. They care nothing about what might happen to even a 12-year-old girl. Of course, that same mindset caused the IRA to think nothing of the well-being of the 10 young children of Jean McConville. The same mindset, same approach and same type of godfathers direct these incidents. I trust that the family in this situation will find some comfort after the ordeal that they have been through and that, as a community, we may finally put to rest the circumstances in which such incidents can even be planned, never mind perpetrated. We are glad that it came to nought on this occasion. How different it could have been.

With the indulgence of the House, I also mention that, yesterday, in Ballymena in my constituency, we had an apparent terrorist incident, when a car was left in the Parkmore/Cullybackey Road area, and it seems that a gun has been recovered. Great inconvenience was caused to families there, and I commend the community spirit that enabled people to cope and get through that. However, the terrorists care nothing about that. Indeed, the more terror and mayhem they create, the happier they will be. If, eventually, someone is made amenable for this offence, I trust that nobody in the House will campaign for their release, escorting them on parole should that arise and showing the hypocrisy that too often goes with the words that flow from certain people's lips.

Mr Spratt: As a retired police officer with 30 years' service, I utterly condemn the incident a few days ago, in which a retired officer and his young daughter almost lost their lives. It brings us back to families and the concern that it causes retired officers' families that these sorts of incidents still happen. I remember having to check cars daily, families having to check cars and grown-up children having to check cars. The thought that we could move back to those days is horrendous. I think that all in the House have condemned and should condemn what happened.

I urge anyone with any information, no matter how small or insignificant they think it is, to report it to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Let us face it, this is not the first incident to have happened in that immediate area over the past two or three years. I also urge all former members to be vigilant in the days ahead. Once again, they need to check vehicles.

In the past, causing horrendous and sometimes fatal incidents did not work, and it will not work now. I urge everyone to support their neighbours. If people see anything suspicious, first, tell the families and, secondly, tell the Police Service. The incident should be, and is being, condemned today, and I welcome that.

Tony McCoy

Mr Speaker: Mr Danny Kinahan has been given leave to make a statement on the accomplishments of Mr Tony McCoy that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. Once again, Members who wish to be called should continue to rise in their places. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject matter. Once again, no points of order or other issues will be raised until this business is dealt with.

Mr Kinahan: I have enormous pleasure in speaking of the phenomenon of Tony — Anthony Peter — McCoy. I am really pleased to see a County Antrim man — a south Antrim man — from Moneyglass do so well in the racing world. In 2005, Antrim Borough Council gave him the freedom of the borough for 2,000 victories. He has been at the top for 20 years and champion jockey for 18 consecutive years. He has won the Grand National; the Gold Cup; the Champion Chase; the Scottish Grand National; the Irish Grand National; the Welsh Grand National; and the Galway Plate. I could go on. He really is a phenomenon.

When I was much younger and lighter, I spent five months trying to be a jockey while I was a student. The 4.00 am early morning starts did not sit well with being a student, but that is what Tony McCoy has been doing for 20 years: early starts, keeping fit and dieting to keep his weight down. He is a tall man. He is an iron man. He is determined. When we see or hear of him, we should all think of him as a great race winner. He has won 4,000 races, and Richard Dunwoody has won only 1,699. Tony McCoy is miles ahead of everyone else.

He is also a kind, quiet person. I do not know how many of you saw, years ago, Red Rum being brought into a BBC studio and Tommy Stack speaking to him from another place. Red Rum's ears lifted. That is the sort of relationship that someone such as Tony McCoy has with every single one of his horses.

He does have a downside: he is an Arsenal supporter. We will forgive him that. *[Laughter.]* We think of Redgrave, Ainslie, Wiggins and even Ferguson. In 2010, Tony McCoy was also sports personality of the year. He is a fantastic ambassador for this country. Roll on 5,000 wins.

Mr Clarke: It pleases me to join with Danny Kinahan in my remarks about A P McCoy. I had the privilege of being present when A P McCoy received the freedom of the borough

from Antrim Borough Council. For those who do not know, Moneyglass is a fairly small settlement outside Toomebridge, and he has brought great honour to the area. On certain days and occasions in the House, other sportspeople have been honoured. A P McCoy is a fairly modest, quiet and unassuming gentleman, and, that day, he came and received his award in a very quiet manner. The recognition that he has brought stands well for the Toomebridge and greater south Antrim area.

When I was a child, the television was always on in our house. You would have seen various jockeys on television. However, none has done what A P McCoy did last week in achieving 4,000 race wins. I wish him all the best in his future and what he continues to do. He has not forgotten where he came from. Having met him in 2005, I can say that he has never forgotten his roots in south Antrim. I wish him the best for the future.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I join with my colleagues from the South Antrim constituency to congratulate Tony McCoy. Very often in the Assembly, we are preoccupied with issues on which we disagree. I think that the discussions on the despicable circumstances of the abortive car-bomb attack and Tony McCoy's achievement show all that is positive and solid about our people.

Across the piece, Tony McCoy represents how people can overcome adversity and succeed. It requires hard work, diligence and an iron will, and he represents all that.

In all the references to Tony McCoy since he achieved that landmark victory to reach an unbeatable total of 4,000 wins, people could see that the reason for such a phenomenal achievement was the fact that he had total focus and dedication. He also had the support of his family, and it would not have been possible to put all that effort, suffering and sacrifice into those achievements unless he had had their full support. I have had the privilege of meeting Tony McCoy's family on a number of occasions. You can see the characteristics of a family that is united and, naturally, intensely proud of Tony's achievements.

If the Assembly were to reflect the joint pride that we all have and its positivity, we could set it against the voices in our community that look for the glass-half-empty option and who, with their negative contributions, drag us back and invoke a spirit of despair. Tony McCoy's life and achievements are the antithesis of that. He

proves what can be achieved with commitment and determination. For that reason, I thank Danny for raising the issue, and the entire House will take pleasure and pride in Tony McCoy's achievements. Finally, I reiterate that the Assembly will have the opportunity to honour Tony McCoy because the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure has stated her intention to invite him here, welcome him and publicly acknowledge his contribution.

Mrs McKeivitt: I am delighted to be associated with the congratulations to Tony McCoy on his amazing career to date, with the record number of 4,000 wins achieved last Thursday. With that milestone, Tony's achievements stand as legendary in the history of horse racing in Ireland and internationally. He has been champion jockey in each of the past 18 years. To reach the pinnacle of any sport is commendable, but to stay there for almost two decades is remarkable.

Tony's career, as has been mentioned, has included wins in the biggest races in the National Hunt calendar such as the Gold Cup and the Champion Hurdle at Cheltenham and the Grand National. In a sport in which falls are inevitable and injuries are common, Tony has had his fair share. What has endeared Tony to his fans here and across the world is that he has accepted triumph and disappointment with modesty, humility and good grace. Now, he is judged by the standards that he sets for himself, but his place in Irish and international sporting history was assured long ago, and his achievements continue to be an inspiration to us all.

The SDLP is backing the call by its own Councillor Thomas Burns for a statue of Tony McCoy to be erected at Down Royal that would stand proudly, reflecting the horse-racing history that this local hero has made. I offer our congratulations to Tony and his family.

Mr McCarthy: Like other Members, I wish to congratulate A P McCoy on his achievements, particularly on his fantastic horse-racing record. He has been a tremendous sportsman and ambassador for Northern Ireland. He joins the host of sporting icons that have come from here. I had the pleasure of meeting Tony and his family at Stormont not so long ago. They were truly a very humble and decent family from Moneyglass.

As has been mentioned, Tony McCoy has already received the freedom of the borough from Antrim Borough Council. I believe that Tony has a great future ahead of him. On behalf of the Alliance Party, I congratulate him

and say "Well done. Continue to enjoy your chosen sport and pick up more prizes and trophies as you jump and race along. Continue to be a sporting hero for Northern Ireland".

My Assembly colleague and the Minister for Employment and Learning, Dr Stephen Farry, asked me to refer to J P McManus, who is the owner of the horse that provided the 4,000th winner last week. It is appropriate to acknowledge the support that J P has given over many years through the provision of scholarships to many local students from low-income households. That has enabled those who may not have attended higher education to go to university and become further assets to our economy. We say a sincere thanks not only to A P and J P but to everyone for their support and wish everyone well for the future.

12.30 pm

Executive Committee Business

Care Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Care Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 30 October 2013, contained in clauses 49 to 53 dealing with cross-border provider failure.

During the previous debate on the Care Bill, which took place on 24 June 2013, I advised Members that the main purpose of the Bill was to modernise care and support law and to consolidate a number of existing pieces of legislation into a single, clear statute. During the debate, I also advised Members that discussions were ongoing between the four UK Administrations that would seek to introduce a clause at the amendment stage of the Care Bill to provide for temporary local support in a situation in which clients are receiving a care package in a UK country other than the one that is funding their care and the care provider's business subsequently fails.

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

In a Northern Ireland context, the amendment will introduce a duty on health and social care trusts to step in and temporarily meet the needs of clients placed in Northern Ireland by local authorities in England, Scotland or Wales, where the provider of that service user's care package fails. In a circumstance in which a trust steps in and meets the needs of a client, any costs incurred in the course of fulfilling that duty can subsequently be recovered from the relevant local authority in England, Scotland or Wales. That will, of course, be a reciprocal arrangement. This means that people from Northern Ireland who are placed by health and social care trusts in England, Scotland or Wales and whose care provider fails will benefit from a speedy intervention to secure their care package from the local authority in the area in which they live.

It is my view that the proposed amendment to the Care Bill requiring the consent of the Assembly will ensure continuity of care for clients for whom we arrange care outside of Northern Ireland. It will also ensure that there

will be no periods of unmet need due to the business failure of a provider. I believe that the provision will allow a reasonable and fair process to be followed on the regrettable occasions when a provider's business fails.

I consider this to be a positive measure that seeks to protect our most vulnerable client groups against any service provision problems arising from the failure of providers. It also gives additional protection to those placed across the UK. On that basis, I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for his statement. On behalf of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, I support the motion. The Committee took evidence on the Bill from departmental officials on 18 September and agreed at its meeting on 9 October that it was content with the motion.

As the Minister said, the legislative consent motion is required to provide a legal basis for local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland and our health and social care trusts to meet an individual's care needs and maintain continuity of care for patients placed in care when a care provider fails. The Committee welcomes this move, which will provide security of care for some of our most vulnerable older people. The Committee supports the legislative consent motion.

Mr Wells: As the Chair has said, the Health Committee has scrutinised the legislation. We have asked a few questions about it but are generally content with the issue. We have had prior warning about what can go wrong, as one of the leading providers of social care recently got into financial difficulties. Indeed, it is active throughout the United Kingdom. So, it is important to guard the rights of the most vulnerable in our community, who are often very elderly people in care who would, of course, like the reassurance that, if something goes wrong, there is legislative support for them. On that basis and to ensure equality right across the United Kingdom, I have no problem whatsoever supporting this.

Mr Beggs: I too lodge my support for the motion. It seems a simple and logical way to improve the lot of the citizens to whom it applies. Someone may have an elderly relative living in England, and, at some point, it may be better that they return home where they may have more friends and family available to

support them. Through this enabling legislative consent motion, regulations will be produced that will ensure that costs that may be incurred in one location in the United Kingdom will transfer to another. There will also be a mutual benefit to patients, and we will improve the lot of those who might need a care package. I understand that this has applied to a relatively small number of people to date and that around 24 people have transferred from Northern Ireland to England. It is much better that we regularise the situation rather than have a bureaucratic system that could take longer than it should. Clear guidance should be available, and mutual, reciprocal arrangements should be in place that will be applicable for the benefit of our citizens.

I understand that, on top of that, the Health Research Authority will be abolished as an independent body and will be established as a non-departmental public body. Again, it has been said that that is being done to enable the body to take on other responsibilities. I understand that its funding presently comes from Westminster. That is the direction of travel that it is taking. It would be illogical for us to have separate legislation to allow that to happen, especially as the funding is at Westminster in any case. So, we ought to support the motion for a number of reasons.

Mr McCarthy: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I, too, support the LCM.

Adult social care is a huge issue for all societies, including our own. It is about how we ensure that the best care can be given to fully support our citizens and how we resource an efficient and effective system.

In this modern world, people have been much more mobile in their life. For instance, they may have had to move away from their traditional home and locality for work etc. In addition, families can now spread out across jurisdictions, so we will have situations where adults are receiving or should be receiving care in a different jurisdiction from that in which they previously resided. For example, they may wish to be closer to family members. We can consider a host of such scenarios, and, therefore, it is right that, across the UK, the different jurisdictions should seek to regularise how all this will be regulated and resourced.

It might be useful if the Minister could clarify how this will work, especially if the regions of the UK adopt different approaches to the resourcing of adult social care, and how any tensions that result would be managed. We

also know how important health-related research is both to improving and saving lives and for our economy. My party and I are happy to support placing health research on a stronger footing, and we support the legislative consent motion.

Mr Poots: I thank a number of parties, and I thank the Business Committee for agreeing to revise the original motion. It is important to identify precisely the provisions of the Bill that the Assembly is being asked to endorse for extension to Northern Ireland. I therefore wrote to the Speaker to ask him to accept the revised wording in place of the original motion. I also copied my letter to the Chair of the Health Committee to alert her to the proposed change to the motion, which is essentially about a technical change to keep pace with amendments in Westminster. I stress that the purpose of the motion is not in any way changed by the new wording. I think —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, certainly.

Mr Allister: I am obliged.

Not being a member of the Health Committee, I do not have the in-depth knowledge of others who have participated in the debate, but I notice that the focus of the debate is very much on the cross-border case. Would clause 48, which seems to require provision by a local authority where a private provider fails, irrespective of whether it is cross-border, apply were a private provider in Northern Ireland to fail? Is there an obligation under clause 48, and will clause 48, in fact, apply to Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: The health and social care trusts do not have the legal power to place clients in the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, there are not similar protections in place in the Republic of Ireland. The Bill has emanated from Westminster, and, as a consequence, the redress within it is Westminster-based and UK-based. This is mainly for people who are originally from Northern Ireland and happen to be in England whose provider fails to provide that service any further because they go out of business. In Northern Ireland, we are able to address that issue, and we would be able to step in quickly were a provider to fail, as has been the case. We should not think that that could not happen again, because it may well do so. In fact, it is quite likely to happen at some time in the future, given the nature of the business and the difficulties that people can find

themselves in. I trust that that gives the Member some reassurance.

I thank the members who contributed to the debate and the Health Committee for taking the time to examine the amendment and for its positive engagement with my officials. As I stated, the introduction of this amendment to the Care Bill is a positive measure that will ensure the continuity of a care package when a provider fails.

I will just deal with Mr McCarthy's question. The Department of Health has announced intended funding reforms. People moving from one area to another will be charged in line with the policy of the area from which they have moved. I trust that that assists Mr McCarthy.

Without further ado, I urge the Assembly to support this, as I consider it to be a positive measure that seeks to protect our most vulnerable client groups against any service provision problems arising from the failure of a provider and gives that additional protection to those who are placed across the UK. On that basis, I ask the Assembly to support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Care Bill, as introduced in the House of Commons on 30 October 2013, contained in clauses 49 to 53 dealing with cross-border provider failure.

Committee Business

Child Protection and Safeguarding: Culture, Arts and Leisure Remit

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

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

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure into Gaps in Child Protection and Safeguarding across the Culture, Arts and Leisure Remit [NIA 140/11-15]; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

As Chairperson, I am pleased to move the motion on the Culture, Arts and Leisure (CAL) Committee's investigation into gaps in child protection and safeguarding across the CAL remit. I thank the other members of the Committee and the Committee staff for the considerable work that they have put into this important investigation report. I also thank all the individuals and groups who contributed to the investigation either by providing written submissions or giving evidence before the Committee.

I am sure that all Members here this afternoon will agree that the protection and safeguarding of children and other vulnerable groups is a cross-cutting issue that should be a priority for all Departments and Ministers, and Members will be aware of my personal interest in and commitment to the matter. I welcome the fact that the Culture, Arts and Leisure Minister is here today to respond to the motion, and I am aware that she and her officials have followed the evidence phase of the investigation closely and have contributed to it. It is also gratifying for the Committee that the Minister's officials have already undertaken actions in response to the Committee's work.

12.45 pm

The Committee's objective in undertaking the investigation was:

“To seek gaps in Child Protection and Safeguarding across the Culture, Arts and Leisure remit, to identify examples of best practice in this area and, by comparing these, make recommendations to the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure with respect to highlighting any gaps and suggesting how they might be mitigated.”

In meeting that objective, the Committee sought to identify the excellent work being done across the CAL remit with respect to the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups. Members then considered how that best practice might be developed into standardised formats, processes and procedures.

The Committee received a briefing on the work of the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in November 2012, and that became the locus for the investigation that the Committee started earlier this year. Throughout the evidence-gathering process, the Committee heard individuals and organisations acknowledge the excellent work undertaken by the CPSU and the standards and best practice that have been established in sport as a result. Members saw how the CPSU encouraged sporting organisations to apply six key principles for best practice in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups: recruitment good practice; effective management of volunteers and staff; reporting; codes of behaviour; sharing information; and general safety and management.

The protection and safeguarding standards that the CPSU has helped to establish in sport have taken considerable effort to achieve. However, Members realised early on in the investigation that those standards represent best practice that can be used to identify gaps and remedy those in other sectors. During the investigation, the Committee was also conscious of the individuals and groups that operate privately and outside the system, particularly self-employed persons. They are not part of the regulation process, and the Committee believes that efforts must be made to reach out to them. We were also mindful of the policies, networks and frameworks for the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups that exist outside the CAL remit and believe that the recommendations coming from the report must acknowledge them.

In undertaking the investigation, the Committee sought examples of best practice to share across the CAL family and to support the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure in developing a more joined-up approach to the issues. During the investigation, the Committee

widened its consideration to include all vulnerable groups, not solely children. The Committee agreed to proceed with an investigation rather than a full inquiry so that the evidence-gathering process could be undertaken over a more condensed period and be specifically focused.

During the evidence-gathering process, the Committee received written submissions and heard oral evidence from a wide variety of organisations, groups and bodies, including the Department, its arm’s-length bodies, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the CPSU, Volunteer Now, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) and a range of stakeholder groups from across the remit. At the outset of the Committee’s investigation, the Department indicated that it would be a willing partner in the process and would give detailed consideration to the Committee’s findings. The Committee looks forward to hearing from the Minister about how her officials will proceed.

As I have said, there are many private tutors and small groups operating across the CAL remit that are unregulated and unaffiliated. Those individuals and groups are often unsure about protection and safeguarding issues, and the Committee wants to reach out to them. Additionally, many organisations that are part of the system and have policies and procedures are still unsure how they should be implemented or applied or would benefit from advice or guidance tailored to their sector. Again, the Committee wants to find ways to reach out to them. Members are also concerned about the challenges presented to vulnerable groups, parents and teachers by the internet and social media and want to identify ways in which those challenges can be mitigated.

The Committee has heard a great deal, through this investigation, about the challenges and benefits presented by the internet and social media. Members are very keen that collective action is taken by the Executive in a number of areas with reference to that, particularly in light of the tragic results of abuse and cyberbullying. The Committee has recommended a number of measures to be taken forward in the CAL remit, but most notably adoption of a Charter Mark standard. Members believe that this standard has the potential to be rolled out across other sectors following a successful CAL sector pilot. There are already examples of this sort of Charter Mark, such as the IFA’s Clubmark Northern Ireland.

Such a Charter Mark would provide a brand for protection and safeguarding that could be awarded to organisations that meet recognised standards and best practice. It could act as a seal of approval, allowing parents and volunteers to know that an organisation has considered these issues and is managing them to a specific standard. Members have further recommended various forms of awareness-raising around protection and safeguarding to publicise the sources of information and help available.

As I have already indicated, there is a role for the Executive to play in combating issues around the internet and social media. However, there is also a significant role for educating parents, carers, teachers, at-risk groups and young people in the safe use of the internet and social media.

Another key issue that the Committee has considered during the investigation, and which has been emphasised by a number of contributors, is that of protecting the volunteers and others who undertake work with children and other vulnerable adults. Members believe that it is extremely important to ensure that those people understand how to protect themselves so that organisations that work with vulnerable groups can still attract staff and volunteers.

I return to the excellent work of the CPSU. The Committee has recommended that the Department examines the idea of developing similar units in the arts and culture sectors. It is important that a successful model like the CPSU is replicated as part of the process of creating standardised protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups.

Although the Committee made specific reference to children and young people in the objective and terms of reference for the investigation, members are clear that this issue extends to a much wider group of people. The Committee believes that protection and safeguarding policies and procedures should be cognisant of, and specifically clarify, the range of groups to which protection and safeguarding should apply.

"Vulnerable groups" is a phrase that the Committee heard a number of times during evidence sessions, and members believe it is important that safeguarding policies and procedures ensure that there is clarity that this generic phrase includes all children and young people, adults with disabilities, special needs or other vulnerabilities, and those with greater exposure to risk of harm.

Paul Stephenson of the CPSU highlighted to the Committee during the investigation:

"There is a need to motivate organisations that want to do things, teach people, give them skills, and so on. They need to up their game ... It is about professional support mechanisms whereby they can download forms, information and guidance and access training that is specific to their sector. It is about supporting the voluntary sector. It is not about saying, 'You have to go and do this, but we do not have any answers for you.'"

Paul is absolutely right. We must provide people with the right tools to ensure that they undertake protection and safeguarding properly. The best way to close gaps in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups is to work together as a network, with clear structures for information sharing. Members are keen that that networking should also involve the Churches and faith groups, and local government.

A significant element in closing gaps in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups is awareness. As well as the Committee's recommendation of a CAL Charter Mark standard pilot, there must be a wider awareness-raising campaign. Other Ministers might be able to help the Minister inform such a campaign. The Charter Mark campaign should also act to highlight protection and safeguarding requirements to self-employed persons and unregulated groups. A significant aid to better understanding and practical use of policies and procedures for the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups is that they are standardised. Local government could and should play a key role in that.

In recognition of the electronic world in which we all live, the Committee has recommended that the Department plays a full part in the Executive's development of an e-strategy and should consider one of its own for the CAL family. The Committee also believes that there is a need for a safeguarding portal, a link leading from websites where one might go to seek information on protection and safeguarding to a website giving the most up-to-date policy and procedural information. The Committee believes that the development by the IFA of a smartphone application that does something similar to the portal should be assessed and considered for a wider roll-out. Similarly, the Committee sees a need for the Department to develop an acceptable users' policy and a code of conduct for communication with young people through any form of social

media, with guidelines on when and how young people should be communicated with. That would give those working with children and young people a more tangible basis on which to conduct relationships.

As a model of best practice, the Committee has recommended that safeguarding and the protection of vulnerable groups be a permanent agenda item for the Department's accountability meetings with its arm's-length bodies (ALBs). The Department must also hold records of any concerns about protection and safeguarding that have been raised with the ALBs and any subsequent action taken. Additionally, the Committee has recommended that the Department and relevant ALBs develop a model for an audit of organisations in the arts and culture sectors. That would examine the policies and procedures that bodies in the sectors have in place to protect and safeguard vulnerable groups. The audits should be taken forward as soon as is practical.

The establishment of a young person reference group would give young people a voice in key policies and strategies, including the development of policies and procedures for protection and safeguarding. The Committee suggests that the group might work effectively on a virtual basis and could, again, be part of a Charter Mark standard pilot in the CAL sector. It is important that the group takes cognisance of existing frameworks for advice and cooperation and avoids the duplication of work. The Committee has recommended that the Department take that forward. Liaison with the Commissioner for Children and Young People should ensure that the group does not duplicate the work of other bodies and that it is plugged into appropriate networks.

The Committee gave a great deal of consideration to the position of volunteers during the investigation. Members believe that people can be put off volunteering to work with vulnerable groups by protection and safeguarding policies and procedures that can be off-putting and intimidating. To offset that, the Committee has recommended that the Department engage with relevant networks and stakeholders and with existing frameworks to promote and disseminate specific guidance for volunteers working with vulnerable groups, thus allowing them to be sufficiently knowledgeable and secure to undertake volunteering and providing an environment of information that will encourage new volunteers.

The Committee is acutely aware that issues around the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups are very fluid and constantly

changing, particularly in the areas of the internet and social media. That is why members have recommended that training and retraining for those working with vulnerable groups in the CAL remit be set within specific time frames, probably every two years, to ensure their relevance.

To underpin much of what the Committee has recommended following its investigation, members also recommend that the Department establish a memorandum of understanding with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) or, if more appropriate, seek membership of one or more of the SBNI's committees.

The Committee believes that the investigation has been extremely worthwhile and that members' recommendations will help to close some of the gaps in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups that it helped to identify.

I look forward to an interesting and useful debate. I commend the Committee's investigation report to the House.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún seo inniu. I speak in support of the motion. Mar atá ráite cheana féin, the CAL Committee's investigation into gaps in child protection and safeguarding across its remit arose from a briefing from the NSPCC a year ago on the work of its child protection support unit (CPSU). The CPSU has a record of excellent work in that area. The six best practice standards that have been established in sport are an example of that. The Committee decided that it was appropriate to undertake an investigation across the remit of Culture, Arts and Leisure to seek out any existing gaps, given the wide range of bodies, organisations, small groups and private agencies that operate in the field of children and vulnerable people.

Although the large agencies and arm's-length bodies are well established in their policy development and adoption of appropriate processes and procedures, many smaller groups and private individuals operate in an unregulated way. Cé go bhfuil cúraimí acu chomh maith, ag cinntiú go bhfuil siad ag feidhmiú i ndóigheanna a thugann cosaint do pháistí agus daoine i mbaol, níl sé i gcónaí soiléir cad é mar atá sin déanta acu. Although they also have responsibilities to ensure that they operate in ways that safeguard children and vulnerable people, it is not always clear how they do this. In recognition of that, the

Committee sought to reach out to such groups to offer advice and guidance focused on that sector.

1.00 pm

The investigative work that was undertaken by the Committee involved taking evidence from a range of groups over a period of months. This has been a valuable exercise, and the Committee was impressed by the work that many organisations have been involved in to ensure that they are fulfilling their responsibilities. A notable aspect of the process has been an evolving backdrop to that work, which continued to inform the Committee on the importance of developing policy in this area. It also illustrated the serious and complex nature of safeguarding children and vulnerable people. That backdrop has been the revelations of instances of abuse by celebrities that was visited on young, vulnerable people over many decades, the most notable of which was the Savile case. Such examples had the effect of clarifying and emphasising the absolute requirement for establishing best practice in all cases in which people are involved in work or leisure that brings them into contact with children or any vulnerable person.

A specific area of concern was the evolving world of social media and internet sites. The undeniable benefits of the internet were acknowledged and accepted, alongside a need for proper safeguards and protections to ensure that the young and vulnerable are not harmed, manipulated or compromised. On that issue, the Committee took evidence from Wayne Denner, who delivers workshops on cyberbullying and appropriate online behaviour. Wayne talks about the impact of cyberbullying and has become a key adviser on awareness and strategies for prevention aimed at educators, parents and community organisations that work with young people. His contribution to this ongoing and ever-changing issue is extremely important.

The Committee believes that the best way to close gaps in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups is for key stakeholders to work together with clear structures for information sharing. It is also vital that the training, advice, policies and procedures are standardised. Tá sé riachtanach chomh maith go bhdfuail traenáil, comhairle, polasaithe agus nósanna imeachta curtha ar bhonn chaighdeánaithe. Specifically, there is a need for a clear brand — a Charter Mark standard — to identify best practice, which organisations and bodies should aim towards. People working at an individual level need protection

and guidance and should be identified using an awareness campaign. A website link, similar to that used by CEOP, should direct individuals or groups to the most relevant up-to-date advice and information. A safeguarding smartphone app, such as that brought forward by the IFA, should also be developed. As was stated, the role of educating children and young people, teachers and parents in the positive use of the internet and social media is vital. These actions could all be piloted under the CAL remit, with a clear focus on the Charter Mark standard.

On a final note, it is also vital to emphasise the need for continuous staff training across all organisations and agencies in safeguarding and protecting children and vulnerable people. In undertaking this investigation, I believe that the Committee has shown leadership and responsibility. Agus an coiste i mbun an taighde seo, creidim gur léirigh sé go raibh sé i ndáiríre ó thaobh ceannaireachta agus freagrachtaí de.

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

Ms McCorley: Molaim an rún seo.

Mrs McKeivitt: I am pleased to contribute to the debate on the Committee motion. The safeguarding and protection of children, young adults and vulnerable people is paramount. Children and young people have the right to be safe and the right to be protected, and we as public representatives are duty-bound to ensure that these rights are extended to every single child, young adult and vulnerable person. As was mentioned, the NSPCC briefed the Committee in November 2012 on the excellent work of its child protection in sport unit. I thank the NSPCC for meeting the Committee on this occasion as the briefing highlighted the need for an investigation into the gaps that might exist regarding child protection in the CAL remit.

The investigation identified that some arm's-length bodies and funded groups do have child protection policies and procedures. Others have policies in place, but there is uncertainty about how they would be implemented. Many groups and private tutors do not have policies in place. It has also been identified that many groups and private tutors have received no advice or guidance on how to deal with child protection effectively. The differences in approaches to child protection are concerning and must be rectified.

After careful consideration of evidence submitted by relevant bodies, the Committee

agreed that a standardised system of best practice should be implemented across the CAL remit, including private groups and tutors. The recommendation for a Charter Mark standard for the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups should be given full consideration by the Department. For the Charter Mark standard to be successful, it would have to be implemented widely across the CAL family. An effective awareness campaign should be launched, and information on best practice standards must be readily available.

I hope that the Department will consider implementing the Charter Mark standard as a pilot that can then be rolled out throughout various other Departments. I recognise the Department's support for the investigation to date, and I am pleased to hear that it prompted the Department to reinstate its own child protection working group.

I urge the Department to give due consideration to the NSPCC recommendation that a body such as its child protection in sport unit should be developed for the arts. Over the past number of years, we have seen an increase in the information of arts and culture groups. I ask the Department to support the creation of such a body in order to sufficiently protect all children and vulnerable people as well as tutors, mentors and, of course, our volunteers.

Living in the digital era, the Committee recognised that child protection online is very difficult to monitor. The recommendation for an e-strategy carries merit, and I further propose that training sessions be offered to groups and tutors in public buildings such as libraries. Wayne Denner, a digital expert from my constituency, previously visited the Committee to speak about online safety. Specialists such as Wayne should roll out training on how to keep children, young adults and the vulnerable safe when online.

I will finish by commending the Committee Clerk, Peter Hall, and the whole Committee support team for all their work throughout the investigation. We are very grateful to you.

Ms Lo: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I want to make a few comments on this comprehensive report and commend the CAL Committee for conducting this very worthy investigation.

Following the disclosure of sexual abuses perpetrated by Savile and other celebrities, with many reports not being examined properly by the authorities, we must learn the lesson of

listening to what children and young people tell us and take actions to investigate allegations of abuse, regardless of the alleged perpetrator.

I totally endorse the Committee's view that the best way to close gaps in the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups is for all statutory and voluntary agencies, including church organisations, to work together as a network with clear structures for information sharing. The creation of the Safeguarding Board NI last year provides that type of coordinating platform where different agencies can work in a more coherent manner.

I support the Committee's innovative recommendation for the development of a Charter Mark standard to be piloted initially in the CAL sector. We have universal benchmarks, such as Investors in People, so why not have a recognised brand for best practice in child protection? I am sure that the sector will welcome such an initiative, particularly as the report indicates that it may be beneficial to the self-employed individuals who tutor music or coach sports in a private capacity, outside of any regulated structure.

I agree with the report that the sports sector has established good systems in the protection of vulnerable groups over the years, and it is important that such good practice is extended to the arts and culture sector. I therefore welcome the Committee's recommendation that the Department works with the Arts Council and other culture bodies to establish a model for an audit of organisations, looking into the policies and procedures put in place within the sector.

I support the recommendation that the Department and all its relevant arm's-length bodies seek to establish an equivalent of the child protection in sport unit for the arts and culture sector. The Committee recommends that the Department engage with relevant networks to promote and disseminate specific guidance for volunteers working with vulnerable groups. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the thousands of volunteers in our communities helping in sports and arts activities. Without them, many clubs and organisations simply could not function.

At this point, I want to raise a concern from a constituent of mine who is a volunteer with a sports club. Although he fully acknowledges the importance of knowledge for volunteers — he has completed all the necessary training courses — he is concerned that some organisations, including some sports governing bodies, are refusing to recognise the generic Keeping Children Safe course, provided by

YouthNet and others, as being the adequate requirement for volunteers. He is unhappy that volunteers are being charged to obtain the necessary certificate and are therefore out of pocket. He believes that that should not be the case. According to my constituent, what seems to have happened is that a cottage industry, as he calls it, in training volunteers has developed, with a lack of central regulation. I understand that he made enquiries to the Safeguarding Board but was told that the board is powerless to oblige organisations not to charge for training. Perhaps the Minister can shed some light on that issue later in the debate. I support the motion.

Mr Humphrey: As colleagues have said, in December 2012, the CAL Committee agreed to conduct an investigation into the gaps in child protection and safeguarding across the Culture, Arts and Leisure remit in Northern Ireland. From January until May this year, written submissions and oral evidence were received from a range of organisations in, as the Chair said, the DCAL family, but also from organisations such as Volunteer Now, the Northern Ireland Association of Social Workers (NIASW), the NSPCC, Churches and faith-based organisations, and community organisations such as the Ulster-Scots Community Network, Foras na Gaeilge, Swim Ireland, the GAA, the Irish Football Association (IFA) and the Ulster branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU). Therefore, a huge wealth of information, comprehensively given, is now available to the Committee.

That piece of work followed the Committee's briefing from the NSPCC in November 2012. I have to say, as someone involved in youth work, that I think that this work is invaluable for government and for the people of Northern Ireland involved in youth work and youth provision.

At this point, I declare an interest as a member of the Scout Association and president of the West Belfast District Scout Council. I pay tribute to the people who are working across our community in organisations such as the Boys' Brigade, Girls' Brigade, Scouting, Guiding, youth clubs, sports clubs and Church organisations. We hear politicians on the mainland talk about the Big Society. Those people are involved in delivering the Big Society, many of them at their own cost and to their detriment. As someone involved in a youth organisation, I am concerned that we are putting people off becoming volunteers and getting actively involved. It is vital therefore that we protect those people who want to become practitioners on a voluntary basis but also

protect young people from allegations and abuse, whether that abuse and those allegations involve state institutions, youth organisations, Churches, care homes, sports and youth clubs or, indeed, the home.

1.15 pm

I served on the OFMDFM Committee for a time, and I met people who were involved in institutional abuse cases. I spoke to Margaret McGuckian, who leads an organisation of victims, and I spoke to some of her colleagues. Some of the stories that they told me in my office of young people being subjected to such evil were absolutely harrowing and terrifying. There were stories of cruelty that were just beyond belief. Therefore, we must do all that we can to prevent such evil in future.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I also serve on the Justice Committee. You will be aware that the Human Trafficking Bill is coming forward. Again, we need to ensure that Lord Morrow's Bill, which that Committee is scrutinising, is there to protect young people and the vulnerable in Northern Ireland and across the European Union. I have to say that I am concerned that, despite that Bill and other protections, young people and the vulnerable in Northern Ireland will not perhaps be as protected as those in the rest of the United Kingdom because of the failure to extend and fully deploy the National Crime Agency here. In my party's view, Sinn Féin's refusal to fully support the NCA and the SDLP's objections on the grounds of accountability will leave young people in Northern Ireland more exposed and vulnerable than their counterparts in the rest of the United Kingdom. I urge those two parties to reconsider their position.

Mr Peter Davies of CEOP spoke to the CAL Committee in March. Mr Davies advised the Committee that he leads for the Association of Chief Police Officers on child protection and investigations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In his evidence, he advised that it was increasingly difficult to distinguish between online and offline threats. He also outlined his belief that child exploitation:

"is about vulnerability meeting power — vulnerability on the part of victims and power on the part of offenders".

The CEOP strategy talks about being able to "prevent, protect and pursue" for the future.

Resources are key in combating abuses. It is vital that, to protect children and vulnerable

people, organisations that are tackling these issues come together, pool resources, share information and expertise and set aside political ideologies.

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

Mr Humphrey: The NCA needs to be extended to Northern Ireland for the maximum protection of our young people, who are the most vulnerable people in our society.

Mr Ó hOisín: Go raibh maith agat a LeasCheann Comhairle, agus tá mé iontach bródúil agus sásta a bheith ag labhairt ar an ábhar iontach tábhachtach seo inniu. B'fhéidir go mbeidh sé ar an ábhar is tábhachtaí a bheidh an coiste seo a phlé.

I am pleased and happy to speak on this matter here today. It is probably the most important subject to come before the Committee to date.

The motion is on foot of the investigation on gaps in child protection and safeguarding across the CAL remit, but it has been stretched in part to represent those covered by the generic phrase "vulnerable groups". In December 2012, the Committee agreed to investigate the gaps that exist. The investigation was later widened, which is to be welcomed. During the investigation, the Committee received representations from our arm's-length bodies and many other organisations and individuals in the sector.

A major concern on which there has been limited discussion is the relatively new medium of the internet and social media. It presents particular identification procedures and mitigating measures. It also challenges all who deal with children and the vulnerable to be aware of an ever-moving target. OFMDFM is engaged across the Executive to look at particular aspects that are pertinent to carers, teachers, parents and at-risk groups. That work must be supported by better evidence and information. The excellent child protection standards that exist in Club Maith for the GAA and Clubmark in rugby and soccer must be replicated across the board, avoiding duplication. We encourage the Minister to instigate that.

Protection must also be given to those who give freely, willingly and voluntarily of their time and expertise for the benefit of wider society. Encouragement of organisations in this field is also a necessary requirement, given the number of high-profile TV and celebrity cases of

child abuse to date and their effect on the whole of society.

The Committee recommends the installation of a charter mark that could be rolled out across all sectors, including local government and the community and voluntary sectors. A complementary awareness campaign should also be instigated. These safeguards will hopefully be followed through on up until and post RPA and be established in any future local authority governance.

The investigation has been central to the development of an overall e-strategy that should ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups and parents are addressed. The Committee encourages the Minister to engage with the Irish Football Association, whose safeguarding smartphone app is lauded as a pioneering development worldwide.

The education sector also has its role to play. There is also a role for the Arts Council and cultural bodies in drawing up an audit of organisations in the arts and culture sector, carrying out periodic reviews and conducting two-yearly strategic audits to keep all participating organisations up to date with best practice. A biennial conference should also be organised to focus minds and exchange information, probably in sync with any review.

As I said at the outset, this is a major piece of work that is long overdue and welcome. I hope the House can unite in support of the investigation. Tá súil agam go bhfuil muid ábalta teacht le chéile i bhfabhar an fhiosraithe agus an moladh seo.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the report by the CAL Committee. I was surprised by its topic, because I was not aware that the investigation was going on. It is clear from the recommendations that there was a need for it, and the Committee has identified gaps in current provision. I commend the Committee for doing that.

It is important that every Department and every organisation recognises its responsibility in the protection of children and young people and, indeed, vulnerable adults. I therefore welcome some of the recommendations. For example, the proposal for an awareness campaign, particularly for those working in the arts sector, must be welcomed to ensure that people are fully aware of their responsibilities.

There is also a recommendation regarding those who are self-employed in that area. Again, sometimes small groups can forget that

responsibility falls to them, and, when someone who is self-employed comes in, it is important that they are adequately trained and regulated. Sometimes, that aspect can be overlooked, so it is right that it is highlighted.

I ask the Minister to investigate how those who may work with multiple groups can be facilitated in a more efficient manner, because there are some practical difficulties. I declare an interest as a Boys' Brigade officer and a member of the Carrickfergus Community Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group. I had to go through two sets of child protection assessments, just as many others in the community have had to. It seems bureaucratic that, having been cleared, you may have to submit a fresh application perhaps within weeks when the same criteria are assessed and an assessment of someone's suitability is determined. We need to move towards a degree of individual assessment that could be a passport, provided that it is checked in a reasonably short period. Self-employed persons who work in the arts sector may have to go through clearance with each group that they work with unless the group is facilitated by someone who has been cleared and agrees to supervise them whilst they work. That is a barrier, and there is a positive suggestion for improving the facilities.

I am pleased that the Committee has carried out the investigation and highlighted some of the difficulties in the area. Hopefully, improvement will occur as a result.

Mr Storey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I commend the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure for undertaking the investigation and producing the report that we have in front of us. I also place on record the appreciation of many in the House for the work that has been undertaken by the Chair of the Committee, not only in that role but for championing a serious issue that she has very passionately raised over a long time. Most of the recommendations appear to fall within the remit of DCAL, the Health Department or OFMDFM. That said, elements of the report were of considerable interest to the Education Committee and the Education Department. In its deliberations, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure has highlighted how a significant proportion of pastoral care issues dealt with by teachers appear to relate to social media problems, including bullying and inappropriate sexual content and contact. That is a worrying if, sadly, unsurprising finding of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee's investigation.

I note that the C2k providers monitor access to the internet by schools and that that is subject to a detailed filtering policy that categorises websites into groups that are allowed or not allowed. That filtering process is updated several times daily as a result of requests from schools or as new sites appear on the internet. I wonder if, in the winding-up speech to the debate this afternoon, the Deputy Chair of the Committee might confirm that the cyberbullying issues covered in the report are not linked to school-based internet access. I anticipate but would value confirmation that those issues are linked to mobile phone or home-based access. In respect of an overarching strategy for child protection online, we can all agree with the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee that there is a key role for the Executive to play. That said, there is also a significant task for Departments, including the Department of Education, to undertake in order to educate parents, teachers, at-risk groups and pupils in the safe use of the internet and social media.

As we are aware, the Education Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) and will, I am sure, note with interest the reference to the ETI's monitoring of child protection and awareness of schools' ICT policy, for example the pre-inspection of parental questionnaires which are carried out. This is another very useful factual insight provided by this report that will inform the Education Committee's future considerations of these matters, and I intend to have the matter raised for consideration at the Committee this week.

In conclusion, as a Member of the House and the DUP's education spokesperson, I will say that, reading this report, I am disappointed that it seems that there are those in the House who are prepared to allow their political prejudices to mask or cover an evil in our society rather than exposing and going after those who sexually exploit our children. I refer to the inevitable consequence of the establishment of the National Crime Agency, which was referred to by my colleague Mr Humphrey. CEOP will be transferred into that organisation, and, given the key role that it plays in regard to keeping our children, young people and vulnerable groups safe, the parties opposite who have played politics with the issue need to look at their conscience today and ask where they are going with the matter. If they are really interested in protecting children, they should step up to the plate, not only by words and platitudes but by actions. They should show the House and families that they support what is contained in this report.

I will also say that I am somewhat disappointed that it seems as though the Ulster Unionists have come to this ill-informed. I wonder what its Members were doing on the Committee —

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

Mr Storey: — when they could not inform the rest of the party of the importance of the issue. Therefore, I commend the Committee for what it has done —

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

Mr Storey: — and I look forward to action from Members opposite rather than just words.

Mr McMullan: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. At its meeting of 13 December 2012, the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure decided to conduct an investigation into gaps in child protection and safeguarding across the DCAL remit. During the investigation, the Committee decided to widen it to include all vulnerable groups. That includes adults and children. The Committee decided on an investigation rather than a full inquiry so that the evidence could be gathered over a more specific time frame and would be specifically focused.

Oral and written evidence was presented to the Committee. Oral evidence came from a wide range of groups, including DCAL's arm's-length bodies, such as Sport NI and the Arts Council, as well as groups such as the NSPCC and the GAA, and Ulster-Scots, rugby and football organisations. As the evidence was being gathered and presented to the Committee, it became clear that the written and oral evidence was of a very good standard, but, at the same time, it was clear that not everybody was working with the same policies and standards. The Committee agreed that that presented a major problem.

1.30 pm

Another vital part of the investigation centred on vulnerable groups. That section dealt with children and adults who have a disability or special needs. It was clear from the presentation that the majority of those groups had accepted the title "vulnerable groups" within their own policies but, in reality, when questioned at the Committee, could tell very little about the complex needs, complex situations and the vulnerability of the children and adults in vulnerable groups. That is a major gap, because there is no sense in

accepting one title within the whole evidence gathering if we do not know exactly what we are talking about.

Councils play a major part in communities, especially in rural areas and in the protection of vulnerable groups. Their premises, more than anybody's, are used by thousands of vulnerable children, adults and groups who take part in council-organised events. Councils also lease their premises to groups and individuals that run activities for vulnerable and able-bodied adults and children. Therefore it is vital that the councils' representative body, NILGA, makes sure that all councils can implement the same good protection and safeguarding policies not only for themselves but for those who rent or lease council properties to run events that include the disabled.

The Committee recognised that the Department has no remit with local government but sees RPA as a golden chance to have that imbalance changed. There is no better time to do that than now. I spent 23 or 24 years in local government, and, in reality, I never saw the policies changing.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McMullan: No, I am nearly finished. Staff and management in those premises also need to be brought into line. It is known that around 80% of council staff have contact with the public. Once staff are vetted and cleared to work, it is unfortunate that there is little or no formal ongoing training to allow them to recognise and deal with vulnerable groups or individuals and their complex needs or behaviour problems. In the past, we have had cases where children with behavioural problems have actually been asked to leave premises because they are being disruptive. That is because those dealing with them did not know the complexity of that child or individual. When a group books a facility in a building, how many times has management asked for the complexity of the needs of the children or adults who are coming in? Again, I see that as a gap.

It was after listening to the evidence that the Committee recommended that there should be one policy or Charter Mark for everyone. That should be introduced across the Department by the Minister and, when successful, should be implemented through other Departments and their arm's-length bodies, including councils.

I was disappointed to hear today that the word "politics" was mentioned. It was indicated that we were playing politics with this. That is sad, because politics did not raise its head once in

the inquiry through the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr McMullan: That was a very cheap shot at those who are vulnerable. We should do all that we can to help them.

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

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Agus éirímhse ar an ócáid seo le tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún. Fáiltím roimh an Aire anseo inniu agus tá mé cinnte go mbeidh muid ábalta dul chun cinn tábhachtach a dhéanamh ar an cheist áirithe seo. Fáiltím fosta roimh fhoilsiú na tuairisce seo ar na bearnaí atá ann i gcosaint leanaí, daoine goilliúnacha agus daoine óga na heagraíochtaí atá faoi chúram na Roinne Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Fóillíochta. I support the motion and welcome the publication of the Committee's report on the gaps in child protection and safeguarding. I thank the Committee staff for all their work in compiling the report, which is based on evidence given to the Committee over the past year or so from a wide variety of organisations. I thank the Chair of the Committee for the interest that she has taken in the subject and for the comprehensive account of the report that she gave at the beginning of the debate. I may not have the time to go into matters in that amount of detail, but I can say that the Committee, the Department and the Assembly take child protection and safeguarding very seriously, which is only right.

It is useful to highlight, as the Committee has done in its report, the organisations across society that follow and in some cases exceed best practice. In the same vein, we need to examine where there are shortcomings and gaps. We must ensure that such gaps are filled and that we do the best that we can to protect and safeguard young people and vulnerable adults. The report highlights the gaps and, in response, makes useful and significant recommendations that the Committee wishes the Department to implement.

Any community organisation, sporting body or other organisation that works with children and vulnerable adults is aware of the stringent requirements placed on them to ensure that child protection and safeguarding are of the highest standard, and that is only right. The report sets out a process by which we can ensure that those standards are not only met but benchmarked across all sporting and

cultural organisations that come under the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. The report suggests that this can be done best through the use of a Charter Mark system.

The report highlights the good work of the GAA in Ulster through the Club Maith programme and the IFA through its Club Excellence Mark Northern Ireland programme. Those organisations have set the bar high and set a standard for others to follow. We must commend them for their work and recognise their standards. However, we cannot become complacent. The range of areas of work set out in the report for those in the non-sporting field who are funded by and work to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Department is also important. Whether they are small groups, organisations as big as the GAA and IFA or, indeed, self-employed individuals who do not fall directly under the regulations, it is important that we expect the highest standards from everyone.

I hope that the Department will lead the way. We need to offer help, support and guidance to ensure that we reach the highest standards, and we must professionalise the way that we approach the protection of children. The Chair quoted Paul Stephenson of the CPSU. I will not reiterate that here —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member will bring his remarks to a close.

Mr D Bradley: — but, in the end, I join all others in the House and welcome today's report. Might I just say that I regret that —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — Mr Storey and others chose to —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — politicise the debate. The SDLP will work to achieve the type of —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Sorry, I must repeat: the Member's time is up.

Mr D Bradley: — accountability that we need to get a National Crime Agency —

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Mr Michael McGimpsey.

Mr D Bradley: — that suits us and is accountable..

Mr McGimpsey: As a member of the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee, I support the motion. I begin by saying, of course, that Mr Storey's remarks were well off the mark. My party well understands the importance of child protection.

When I was the Minister of Health, I was also responsible for social services. I became very familiar with the difficulties, problems and issues that it was necessary to deal with to protect children. Every year, there were around 20,000 child protection referrals, and about 2,000 children were on the child protection register at any one time. We dealt with that on an ongoing basis to provide support to families and children.

The sexual exploitation of children, which is the subject of the debate, is, however, a different matter. Children's protection normally focuses on issues that are described as the "holy trinity" by social workers: domestic violence; drugs and alcohol misuse; and the mental ill health of parents or carers, which results in the neglect of children. Neglect is the primary issue in that area. Sexual exploitation of children is, of course, entirely different. It is a criminal issue, and I believe that it is a matter, first and foremost, for the police and criminal justice system. It is a matter of apprehending people, taking them to court and, as necessary, putting them behind bars and on the sex offender register.

The steps that we have taken in our Committee investigation add to that. Without going into all the points that have been made by the Committee, which have been made ably by the Chair and others, there are a number of issues on which all Departments have a role to play to provide protection and to ensure that areas within their remits are fit for purpose for the protection of children.

When I became Minister of Health, one big issue that faced the Department, as colleagues are aware, was suicide, particularly among young people. A key way in which to deal with that was to tackle suicide chat rooms, which were proliferating on the internet and through what was then called "new media". I had meetings with internet providers in London, and, at that time, their attitude was that they simply provided the mechanism. They said that they were deliverers and were not responsible for the content on their systems. I found their approach disappointing and negative.

The way in which we dealt with that, on a UK-wide basis, was through Downing Street, Gordon Brown and Professor Byron, who published a report and came forward with recommendations. The Prime Minister became involved, and he had the power and authority to progress the issue with the big internet providers, most of whom were based outside the UK in the US. Progress was made on suicide chat rooms, and there is a lesson there to be learned. It is the way in which the UK is going, and it is a UK-wide issue. Any measures that are put in place have to be in partnership not only with other Governments in the UK but with the Dublin Government in particular on all the issues around the sexual exploitation of children. Those who abuse children do not respect borders and are liable to skip from one jurisdiction to another.

The lesson always was that there should be a partnership approach in the Executive. On this issue, the lead has to be taken by the Department of Justice because it is, first and foremost, a criminal issue. It is a matter for the police and the courts. It is also a matter of all other Departments working together to ensure that we proof, as far as possible, the environment for children.

It is a heinous situation and crime. As we saw recently —

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Member must bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McGimpsey: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. We were looking at care homes. Of course, children in care homes are a small part of an issue in wider society.

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

Mr McGimpsey: Partnership is key.

1.45 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Ar dtús, gabhaim buíochas libh agus ba mhaith liom tacaíocht a thabhairt don rún agus don tuairisc ón choiste.

I thank you all for your contributions to the debate thus far. From the outset, I want to say that I fully support and welcome the report and its recommendations, and I support the motion.

I thank the Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure and the members of the Committee. I also want to thank the

Committee and research staff for the huge effort and time that they put into making the report one of the most significant to come through the Assembly in this mandate. I will explain why.

There is yet another aspect to this report. I have literally just received it and, as all will appreciate, it will take some time to disseminate. I believe that it is obvious that the views of not just the Chairperson, the Committee members and the staff, but those of the witnesses, comprising groups, individuals and organisations who came in person to submit evidence of their views on the issue, have been prevalent throughout the debate. Because of that, it is incumbent on me and the Department to take the report, look at it properly and make sure that it is given due time and consideration. I am also grateful to the Committee for allowing departmental officials to make a presentation on the subject. I welcome the debate and the contributions from most of the Members who spoke purely on the Committee's report.

Let me also say that I have always welcomed the Committee's decision to undertake an investigation into the gaps in child protection and safeguarding. That is the business of us all, regardless of the Departments for which we have responsibility.

Many thousands of children and young people and, indeed, vulnerable adults across the board enjoy taking part in culture, arts and leisure activities every day and every week. As a parent and a grandparent, I know that parents appreciate how important participation in sport is for a child's health and personal development. Those positive effects can take place only if the activities are in the right hands and in the right circumstances, with those who have placed the welfare of all our children first and foremost, and if we adopt practices to support, protect and empower them. That is why it is important that all those activities take place in an environment where our children and young people and adults are safe from the possibility of any form of ill-treatment or abuse.

DCAL is committed to developing and implementing policies and procedures that ensure that everyone knows and accepts their responsibilities in relation to their duty of care. I am committed to ensuring that there are correct and comprehensive reporting procedures that promote good practice and that there are sound recruitment measures for all individuals who work or volunteer in the sector.

That is one of the reasons why, last year, I asked officials to undertake a review of the Department's safeguarding policies, culminating in the publication of revised departmental safeguarding guidance in July 2013. It should also be noted that although DCAL rarely provides direct services to children, some of the functions, and those of many of our partner bodies involved in contact with children and young people, have been raised throughout, particularly in reference to the arm's-length bodies (ALBs).

Mr Humphrey: I appreciate the Minister giving way. Does she agree that the key thing in this issue is the balance between the protections for children, young people and the vulnerable in society, whom we are talking about today, and the practical solution that needs to be found to ensure that we manage to recruit volunteers to keep those organisations going? If we cannot recruit volunteers, whether they are coaches or volunteers in youth organisations, those organisations will collapse.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I totally agree with the Member and I will touch on that later. Anna Lo raised that point. For the record, I thank the 11 Members who spoke in the debate, particularly those who are not members of the Committee. The point that Anna raised is really important. It is not exclusively about sporting groups; there are arts and cultural groups, many of which provide activities through their voluntary contributions. We rely heavily on those groups and we need to give them better support in order to meet what are essential criteria. I am not suggesting for a moment that the Member is suggesting that the balance would be that we would compromise. I accept that fully. We need to make volunteering easier, and we need to make sure that people accept the essential criteria in providing those activities and that they are supported in doing so. If Anna, in particular, has any details that she would like to share with my officials, my door is open at any time.

It is important that we look at the safeguarding guidance — I think that that is what the Member was getting at — that has been compiled to support our partner organisations. It seeks to establish best practice in the area of safeguarding, not only within our ALBs but extending our influence across the wider culture, arts and leisure sectors. One way in which we can extend that influence is through the distribution of public funding or the commissioning of services for children and young people. That guidance requires organisations seeking such support to have robust and effective policies and procedures in

place that safeguard and protect children and vulnerable adults. I understand the point that Members made about the self-employed or private practices, and we need to come back to that in more detail, because we have to make sure that there are no gaps that people can use to inflict harm or abuse on children, young people or vulnerable adults.

DCAL will monitor the safeguarding arrangements through regular governance and accountability meetings with our ALBs, and we give a commitment to do that on a regular basis. Safeguarding forms part of the Department's risk-management processes, providing assurances that there are satisfactory safeguarding measures in place across all our ALBs. In addition to those governance measures, DCAL previously commissioned the Education and Training Inspectorate to undertake a review and follow-up inspections of the child protection arrangements in the sample of our ALBs. The inspectorate's report found the quality of safeguarding arrangements in all the sponsored bodies inspected to be satisfactory. Therefore, it is our aim to make sure that that is much more improved.

However, what about the individuals, as I mentioned earlier, working or volunteering in the sectors that fall outside our influence? Members should be conscious of the fact that we need to be mindful of the extent of DCAL's remit. Nevertheless, I accept the point that Members make about looking at where gaps may prevail. I welcome the fact that the Committee, in its report, appear to have considered and recognised that as an issue. I also see that there are recommendations aimed at other Departments and local government. As Members are aware, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister has strategic overall responsibility for children and young people in the North, while the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is the lead Department for vulnerable adults. However, it is everyone's business.

Michael McGimpsey said that he believes that the Department of Justice should lead on this. I understand the Member's concern to make sure that there is a standardised approach taken. I give a commitment that I will meet my Executive colleagues and talk to them about the report and its subsequent recommendations to ensure that we can do all that we can on good practice, even going back to the previous mandate. The example that was given around suicide prevention is excellent. We need to do all that we can to make sure that the vulnerability of children and young people is decreased and that we provide the best

possible protection for all. That collaborative approach is essential.

A key recommendation in the report refers to the Charter Mark. I understand that it is not a new concept, given that the Department of Health looked at the protection of children and vulnerable adults accreditation scheme, and there are also schemes in other reports as examples. However, I believe that we need to work towards a Charter Mark or a recognition that the best possible standards of child protection have been undertaken by groups. That is the least that parents, guardians, and grandparents can expect when they trust their children's safety to others.

It is a complex issue, and, for me, it demonstrates the need for a collaborative approach. I also see from the report's recommendations that my Department and others have already made progress on the opportunity to work with our ALBs and partners to enhance current arrangements, and I welcome that.

This is one of the most significant reports to come through, and I believe that we cannot do enough to protect children, young people and vulnerable adults. Rather than just use words, I am really excited about the potential that we have collectively across the Executive to close gaps and to implement the Committee's report where possible and perhaps even to strengthen some of the other recommendations. However, I will certainly bring back a detailed response in early January.

I am delighted that most Members recognised the importance of the debate and the report. It was a pity that at least two Members, one of whom is a Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee member, chose to make party political remarks. Given the importance of the commitment that I am placing in this report and debate, I believe that that was totally crass. I think that the Chair of the Education Committee's remarks were regrettable and very disappointing. I am glad that the DUP's class clown has left the Chamber. I believe that it was totally unbecoming of this debate, and I really cannot understand how you —

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. I remind the Minister and all Members to be very careful in how they describe other Members.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I appreciate that. I withdraw my "class clown" remark. However, I would like to say that I cannot, for the life of me, understand the Chair of the Committee, with the commitment that she has given over previous

years to safeguarding children's issues, allowing that to sully the debate. I believe that it was an inexcusable move that she made. Given the nature and severity of this Committee report and given the importance of the debate, I think that it was totally disappointing.

Having said that, I support the motion and the recommendations in the Committee report. I welcome Members' contributions and believe that most, if not all, made them for the right reasons. I look forward to rolling the process out in the future. I hope that we can use this report to work with other Executive colleagues to strengthen what I believe is one of the most important issues and challenges that we face, that is: the protection of children and vulnerable adults.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. As Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. This debate will continue after Question Time, when the deputy Chairperson of the Committee, Mr William Irwin, will conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Enterprise, Trade and Investment

Mr Speaker: We will start with 15 minutes of topical questions to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

Tourism: Successes

1. **Mr Kinahan** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, given the wonderful and successful Our Time Our Place and the enormously successful Titanic Belfast, UK City of Culture and many, many other things, including the great work of Howard Hastings, what is the next step, what is the next plan? (AQT 321/11-15)

Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment): I thank the Member for his question. He is right to mention the success of Our Time Our Place, which, of course, was just for 2012. The idea behind that was to give us a platform, and it was a game-changer for the tourism industry. We have continued that this year with the World Police and Fire Games, the UK City of Culture and, of course, the G8, which came to us off the back of the Prime Minister's decision to hold that event in County Fermanagh. Next year, the Giro d'Italia is coming here. We are looking at how events can really make a change to the tourism product here, as well as, of course, investing in our infrastructure. So, it is about investing in the infrastructure and bringing events to Northern Ireland, and we are continuing to work on that strategy.

Mr Kinahan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I wonder whether we can look in future at having an "Our Time Our Place Our People" hall of fame. We can all list many people: Tony McCoy, whom we spoke of already today; Mary Peters; the Northern Ireland football team under Billy Bingham; and Joey Dunlop. We could go on. Can we look at having an Olympic-style museum or a hall of fame that shows the very best of everything in Northern Ireland? Can we put funds towards that and make it one of our top priorities in the future?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that comment. Of course, that has been raised with

me on a number of occasions by, most notably, Dame Mary Peters, who is a great supporter of the idea, and, indeed, Ronnie Spence, the outgoing chair of the Heritage Lottery Fund. I am certainly supportive of the idea. I suppose that the critical issue is not just setting it up but making it sustainable into the future. Therefore, as the Member will understand, it is a matter not just for me but for a number of Departments right across government. If the Member wishes to come to speak to me about that, I am quite happy for him to do so. As I say, it is good to celebrate our people here in Northern Ireland, because that inspires young people from a different generation, and that is what we are all about.

Flag-related Protests

2. **Mr Maskey** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment whether she is aware of the proposed flag-related protests in Belfast city centre in the run up to Christmas and, if so, for her assessment of such protests on the city centre economy. (AQT 322/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. There have been a number of reports recently on the protests' impact on the city centre in particular. I received one recently, and I am still assessing that. I have to say that just 30 firms in Belfast were interviewed, so we have to look at the underlying statistical robustness of the figures that come to us. Notwithstanding that, we have to recognise that protests of any nature in the city centre will have an impact on trade, particularly if they take place in and around the peak shopping times. Therefore, I will renew my call, which I made, I think, the last time that I was on my feet in the House during Question Time, for dialogue between those planning any protest and the people who are most directly affected, that is the traders.

Mr Maskey: I thank the Minister for her reply. I am well aware of and appreciate her previous comments. In light of that, has the Minister managed to have any contact with any of the protest organisers and, more particularly, the retailers themselves to discuss the matter?

Mrs Foster: I, of course, spoke to the retailers right throughout the original protest time. Indeed, the Member will recognise that it was my Department, along with the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), that took the lead in the Backin' Belfast campaign, which was, I have to say, hugely successful and very much appreciated

not only by the traders but by the restaurant owners and bar owners in Belfast.

My door is open. I would very much like to be of assistance and, if I can, to facilitate discussion around anything that is planned for the winter months. We want to see Belfast reach its potential over the winter months, and if there is anything that I can do to assist that, I will, of course, make myself available.

Utility Regulator

3. **Mr Byrne** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what her Department is doing to make the Utility Regulator more effective in protecting the interests of electricity consumers. (AQT 323/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As you know, there has been a change of Utility Regulator. Indeed, we wish the outgoing Utility Regulator well and welcome the new Utility Regulator, Mrs Jenny Pyper, to her position. I look forward to having an engagement with Mrs Pyper in the very near future about her role and how she sees it moving forward. As the Member will know, the Utility Regulator has an independent role. I may express opinions, but it is up to the Utility Regulator whether she takes them into account.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she agree, however, that there is a gross imbalance when somebody is looking for a new supply of electricity? I know someone who has built a new house and has been quoted £16,500 for a connection charge even though they live within 90 metres of an adjacent house. What can be done through the House to make sure that that abuse of power is not manifested in future?

Mrs Foster: The initial findings — they are initial findings — came out on Friday in respect of the RP5 price determination, when the regulator gave a determination that was not accepted by NIE and it went to the Competition Commission. The Competition Commission has made important rulings not only on how NIE deals with its price controls but on how it invests in its infrastructure. I have often said to the House that, when you look at limiting the price of energy, there is a consequence in and around the commerciality of NIE and how it will work in the future. I recognise what the Member is talking about, because, being an MLA from the west of the country, I, too, have had constituents tell me that they are being asked for hundreds of thousands of pounds to connect to the grid. However, it is all connected to how much money NIE can invest in the grid

and how it is allowed to do that. It is regulated by the Utility Regulator, and, if the Member wants me to mention it to the regulator, I certainly will do so when I get the opportunity to meet her.

Springfield Road/Woodvale Regeneration

4. **Mr Cree** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on Invest Northern Ireland's plans for the regeneration of the Springfield Road/Woodvale area of Belfast. (AQT 324/11-15)

Mrs Foster: As far as I understand, the negotiations about that site are ongoing. I understand that the city council has an interest in that site as well and was looking at different plans for that area. It is still in talks about the best way to develop that site.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for that. Could you provide any details of how Invest Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council and Belfast Metropolitan College plan to cooperate in the development of the innovation incubation unit in that area?

Mrs Foster: Belfast Metropolitan College is doing some excellent work in west Belfast, and, indeed, I had the chance to visit and see its work in and around renewable energy and the way in which it hopes to retrain people, perhaps from the construction industry, who are finding it difficult to find work, in the renewable energy sector. I do not have in front of me the details of how those three organisations work together, but I will be happy to provide the Member with written information and place a copy in the Library.

Economic Growth

5. **Mr Brady** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her reaction to the reports published by the Ulster Bank and InterTradelreland, indicating further positive news in the economy. (AQT 325/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I very much welcome both those reports today. It again shows that we are stabilising the economy here and moving into growth mode. It is particularly encouraging that growth was seen not just in specific sectors but right across all the sectors, including retail, services, construction and manufacturing. It is also pleasing to note that employment has expanded strongly as well and, indeed, is at its fastest rate for six years according to the Ulster

Bank's Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) survey. That is to be welcomed, and we look forward to seeing continued growth in the right direction.

Mr Brady: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she accept that the so-called green shoots of recovery are not evident in every sector or location across the North? How does she plan to address that? Go raibh maith agat.

Mrs Foster: As I said in answer to the first question, the PMI report actually says, for the first time, that it sees growth across all the main sectors. I very much welcome that, because, until now, we have been talking about growth, for example, in the agrifood sector, which has always been a very strong sector for us in Northern Ireland, but, in construction and retail, we have seen huge difficulties. I am not suggesting that we are back to where we were pre-2008; I do not suggest that at all. However, we are seeing a stabilisation in relation to some of those sectors. In other words, I think that they have bottomed out, and, because of that, I think that we are seeing growth in those sectors for the very first time.

Business Start-ups

6. **Mr McElduff** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment what financial or other support arrangements are in place for start-up businesses? (AQT 326/11-15)

I thank the Minister for her active interest in the Omagh Enterprise Company, recently and generally.

Mrs Foster: Of course, there is the Start a Business advice and assistance that people gain from Invest Northern Ireland. Members will remember that the regional development programme was in some difficulty last year; I am pleased to say that that has now rolled out very effectively across Northern Ireland. The Member's constituency is one of the stronger constituencies in start-up businesses.

As well as that, I am pleased to see that start-up loans are now being made available. They were being made available in England and Wales; now they are available here as well. I very much welcome that. That was a part of the economic pact, and it was something that we discussed with the Business Secretary when he came to Northern Ireland about a month ago. I am pleased to see that that is now in place.

It is about having companies like Omagh Enterprise to really engender an ecosystem for new companies so that they can approach people like Nick O'Sheil for assistance, and he can then signpost them to the appropriate place. I am a big supporter of Omagh Enterprise. They are doing a tremendous job with the facilities that they have, and I will always be pleased to visit.

Mr McElduff: The Minister knows that Omagh enterprise centre has recently developed a further 31 units. How might her Department work with the business community in Omagh to help fill those units and further develop entrepreneurship?

Mrs Foster: One of the exciting things about Omagh enterprise centre is that it has direct access to Project Kelvin. That is a tremendously strong selling point, and it is one of the reasons why Omagh Enterprise, through Nick O'Sheil, is working with Fermanagh, in the person of Martin Maguire, to develop the "smart region" philosophy. We hope to appoint a data analyst to cover the south-west region in the near future. That will inform companies that seek to set up of the needs of that area. It is an innovative way to look at start-up companies and inward investment. I know that the political parties have been briefed recently on that, and I hope that everybody in the region gets behind that idea, because it is a new way of looking at investment for the south-west region.

Narrow Water Bridge

7. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for her assessment of the tourism potential of the Narrow Water bridge project. (AQT 327/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The Narrow Water bridge project has always been, first of all, a bridge to connect people, as opposed to a tourism bridge. Tourism was always secondary. We wait to hear whether the bridge project will proceed. That is a matter for colleagues in the Executive, in DRD and in DFP.

Mr Lunn: I query the Minister's assessment that it is not a tourism project. I think it largely is. Does she agree with me that, given the number of people who visit Cooley and Carlingford, the relatively small proportion of the cost that will fall to the Northern Ireland Executive and the amount of money that her Department has put into the Mourne area in the last few years, it is a very worthwhile project and should be encouraged from a tourism potential point of view?

Mrs Foster: The Member can take whatever view he wants of the bridge project. I rely on the guidance of my officials on the financial implications and the implications from a tourist perspective. I have to take those on board, as does the Finance Minister when he looks at the financial implications. We await hearing from the Finance Minister and, most importantly, the Regional Development Minister on those issues.

2.15 pm

Mr Speaker: That concludes topical questions. We now move to questions for oral answer. Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Insolvency

1. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment how many businesses have become insolvent in the past 12 months. (AQO 4940/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The total number of businesses that became insolvent in the past 12 months — 1 October 2012 to 30 September 2013 — is 866. That includes bankrupt businesses and companies.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she confirm that, despite company insolvencies being down on a year ago, personal bankruptcies are up by 12% and would be worse without debt relief orders? How serious is the personal debt problem, and what more can the Minister do to help?

Mrs Foster: I do not have the personal debt figures in front of me, but I can tell the Member that, for companies, there have been 417 — actually, I do have the figures: 586 bankruptcies, which is down from 790 last year. The issue with insolvency, bankruptcy, compulsorily going into administration and so on is that there is always a lag in the figures. Indeed, it was the same at the start of the recession. The figures for 2008-09 were not particularly poor, but, once we get into 2011-12, we see the impact of the recession really beginning to take hold. As the economy stabilises, the figures will continue to go in the right direction. The six-monthly trend for insolvencies shows a decrease of approximately 10% on the same period last year. Again, however, there is a lag, so it will take a little while for all that to work through the system.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus mo bhuíochas leis an Aire fosta. I thank the Minister for her response. In light of the difficulties being faced in the local economy, will the Minister advise us whether the much-promised peace dividend from the British Government is now completely off the table?

Mrs Foster: No. The Member is aware of the economic pact being developed. Just last week, I jointly hosted a seminar in Lancaster House in London with the Secretary of State. At that event, we hosted 16 regions and countries from around the world in which we have seen opportunities. I do not accept that the much-vaunted, to use his words, "peace dividend" has gone. Our national Government are very much alongside us in trying to sell Northern Ireland as a good place to do business. The Prime Minister, at the investment conference in October, said that Northern Ireland was a spectacular place to do business. Those were very strong words, and, of course, we will continue to build on that investment conference.

It was very heartening, when the First Minister and deputy First Minister were out in the States a short time ago, to hear another 100 jobs announced for FG Wilson/Caterpillar. We were pleased that those jobs were allotted to Northern Ireland after the investment conference. The significant element of that is that we are now getting jobs in a new area of Caterpillar. The same thing has been carried out through many firms and sectors: we get a particular sector, and we then look to see whether there is any other sector in the business in which we can help the company to do business better. That is what we are doing in Northern Ireland. Things are very positive at present, and we will continue to push Northern Ireland as a region in which to do business.

Mr Frew: The Minister mentioned jobs. Will she comment further on jobs created over the past 12 months?

Mrs Foster: We are very pleased and encouraged that our job market has shown signs of improvement, with more than 5,000 jobs added to the local economy over the year to June 2013. The services sector is a particularly strong sector for us. It has been a key contributor to job growth, with 6,500 more jobs over the year to June 2013. As Members will know, we have always put a strong emphasis on job creation, whether that is from foreign direct investment or through the jobs fund, which continues to be a good success for

the Executive and for Northern Ireland. We have gone past the targets on the numbers of jobs promoted under the jobs fund, and we are very close to the target on jobs created under the jobs fund. As you know, in foreign direct investment, we do not have a target in the Programme for Government for jobs created. We have a target only for jobs promoted, but, in the jobs fund, we have targets for jobs promoted and jobs created, so I am pleased that it looks very likely that we will hit both targets in the near future.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. What support or assistance will be available or can be provided by your Department for viable firms that are experiencing a temporary cash flow problem to prevent them from going out of business?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, it has been a particular problem for many companies across Northern Ireland that their bank is calling in debts or reducing their overdraft facilities and they find themselves in difficulty because they have a viable business but cannot find the working capital to keep going for the time needed to get back into the black. There is a programme called Buying Time assistance, whereby Invest NI comes into a firm and tries to deal with it, if it finds that there is a viable business that needs a specific space of time. It can come in and make that intervention. Of course, we need the banks to work with us and to listen to Invest NI. It is interesting that, in Scotland, the approach is that the Government's regional development agency goes into a bank with a company and says, "We believe in this company, and we want you to work with it". It has said that that can be controversial at times, because you are picking companies and sectors to support. It feels strongly enough about it to go into the banks and sell the proposition to them. Invest NI can put programmes in place, but I am sure that colleagues will also support companies as they go into banks to try to renegotiate deals. That is the most effective thing that we can do as MLAs.

Banking Task Force

2. **Mrs Dobson** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the joint ministerial task force on banking and access to finance. (AQO 4941/11-15)

Mrs Foster: The joint ministerial task force on banking and access to finance in Northern Ireland met officially for the first time on 8 October 2013 and was chaired by the Secretary

of State, the Rt Hon Theresa Villiers MP. The task force is a forum for addressing the challenges faced by Northern Ireland businesses in accessing vital finance. I attended the meeting alongside the Secretary of State, Business Minister Matt Hancock MP, HM Treasury's director of financial services and, of course, the Northern Ireland Finance Minister, Simon Hamilton. Good progress was made at the meeting, with the terms of reference for the task force being agreed and priorities for early engagement discussed.

Mrs Dobson: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will the Minister outline the discussions that she has had with the Finance Minister to get specific lending data published for Northern Ireland, particularly following the availability of GB information from the British Bankers' Association?

Mrs Foster: This is primarily an issue for DFP, but I am very aware of it, having sat in a number of meetings with the previous Finance Minister and with the current Finance Minister. They never fail to talk about the fact that they have difficulty sourcing regional data. Indeed, the Minister of Finance and Personnel is still concerned about the lack of detailed regional data. He met Anthony Browne, the chief executive of the British Bankers' Association, on 11 September to discuss how the quarterly SME bank lending data that it provides to DFP could be improved. It has given an undertaking that it will work with the banks to develop this data set, but, frankly, this has been going on for far too long. If we are to make any assessment of the banking system in Northern Ireland and how it lends to different sectors, we need the data. Of course, we do not have any direct control over the banks in Northern Ireland, which is why I welcome the ministerial task force. We hope that we can put some pressure on the banks to give us the data, and I know that the Finance Minister is keen on that issue.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers. How does she view the announcement made last week that the Royal Bank of Scotland is to carry out a review of the Ulster Bank?

Mrs Foster: First of all, I welcome the fact that the Ulster Bank will remain a core part of the Royal Bank of Scotland. Both the Finance Minister and I have been pressing the issue very strongly with the Westminster Government, and we are pleased that they have recognised that it is a big issue for Northern Ireland.

There are aspects of the announcement, particularly those with possible implications for jobs and the local property market, on which we need clarification and certainty. The Finance Minister is certainly pushing for that certainty and clarification.

We will continue to engage with the Ulster Bank here and, of course, with the Government on all these matters as the review of the Ulster Bank is undertaken. It will provide us with an important opportunity to help shape the Ulster Bank. If it had been taken out of the RBS, we would not have had that opportunity. Most importantly, we need to advocate for the 30% of people in Northern Ireland who rely on the Ulster Bank for their finances. It is a very big player. It is the biggest player in Northern Ireland and, therefore, is a strategically important part of growing the Northern Ireland economy, so we will continue to engage, particularly with the Finance Minister, on those issues.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for her answers. Will she indicate what feedback she has received from the business community with regard to the funding schemes introduced by the Executive?

Mrs Foster: The funding schemes introduced by the Executive, particularly the growth loan fund, have been very warmly welcomed by the business sector. I do not have the up-to-date figures regarding take-up in front of me, but they have been very strong. I am also pleased to say that the small loan fund that we launched has been taken up across Northern Ireland. It is the one to which you can apply for anything from £1,000 to £50,000. It is working well also.

We brought the funds into being because the national schemes did not seem to be gaining traction in Northern Ireland and we felt that we had to intervene with very specific schemes. It is also the reason why we introduced the agrifood loan scheme, which, the Member will know, we hope will have a very positive impact on the poultry sector in its first phase, because we want to see the poultry sector growing very strongly. We believe that there is a market opportunity there, and I hope that many producers will be able to access finance with the help and assistance we have given from government.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a cuid freagraí ansin. I thank

the Minister for her answers. Has she had any assurances from the Ulster Bank that it will continue to afford facilities to SMEs? Those facilities have sadly been cut on many occasions during the past year, causing great pain and consternation to smaller businesses.

Mrs Foster: This goes back to my response to Ms McLaughlin. As MLAs, we need to be vigilant and raise issues with the banks when our constituents feel that they have been treated unfairly. That is one of the reasons why we appointed the independent panel following a recommendation from the economic advisory group. The Member may be aware that the Finance Minister and I have appointed that panel to look at how the financial system works in Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to access to finance for small and medium-sized companies. The panel comprises Professor Russel Griggs, Ann McGregor and John Trethowan. Two of those people are from outside Northern Ireland but have particular expertise in the banking sector, and, of course, Ann McGregor brings the Northern Ireland perspective to the panel. I hope that it will take evidence, and, indeed, if MLAs feel that there is a need to bring evidence to it, I encourage them to do so, to see how the banking system is changing and if indeed it has changed since the height of the recession. We need to see our banks being flexible and working with the business community, particularly the small business community.

2.30 pm

Energy: Security of Supply

3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the discussions she has had with her counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and Westminster in relation to the security of energy supply. (AQO 4942/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department continues to have regular formal meetings on security of energy supply with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) in London, the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in Dublin and the energy industry, through the UK/Ireland gas and emergency planning group. Additionally, the all-island gas and electricity planning group meets regularly to review resilience planning across the island and reports to the All-island Energy Market Joint Steering Group. Work is ongoing between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland on mutual fuel resilience. My Department is represented on a number of

DECC-led groups currently reviewing UK oil and fuel planning policy and emergency arrangements.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her answer. What more can be done? What alternative provision of energy supply could be explored to promote more secure and affordable energy for businesses and households in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: The Member has, perhaps unwittingly, put his finger on two of the most contradictory elements of this: security and affordability. Sometimes, the two do not always match up. On the mainland at present, a real debate is going on concerning green energy taxes. The Prime Minister is looking at that, and I will, of course, watch very closely to see what impact, if any, it has on Northern Ireland. If we were to see any cut in current levels of support and incentives for renewable energy — we have talked a lot in the House about the need to have a mix of energy resources, and, as you know, we have a stringent renewable energy target — that would have an impact in Northern Ireland.

Of course, one of the most critical pieces of infrastructure — the North/South interconnector — is also very important for security of supply. It was a matter that I discussed with Minister Rabbitte on Friday on the fringes of the North/South Ministerial Council meeting. He tells me that the current estimate for the constraint on the system on the island is £30 million a year. Therefore, that is a critical piece of infrastructure that we need to see progressing. He tells me that the Republic of Ireland hopes to go back to an Bord Pleanála in the near future about its part of the interconnector. I think that strategic environmental assessments are going on for the piece in Northern Ireland. As I said, it is a critical piece of infrastructure. I recognise the sensitivities, obviously, from a local point of view, but, if we do not have the North/South interconnector, we are threatening our security of supply in a real and tangible way.

Mr Campbell: Further to that point, will the Minister outline the possible consequences or implications should the very substantial midlands wind farm project in the Irish Republic prove to be successful in generating significant energy?

Mrs Foster: The midlands wind farm project is a Republic of Ireland onshore wind facility that connects to Great Britain through the east-west interconnector, which is now in place. When I

was at the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) conference recently, I heard that it was very proud of the fact that it had delivered the east-west interconnector. From a security of supply point of view, it has been very important. The Westminster Energy Bill provides for non-UK renewable generation to receive support through a UK feed-in tariff, which means that consumers in the UK actually pay for non-UK renewable energy. Therefore, excess wind energy from the Republic of Ireland may in the future be traded with Great Britain and contribute to the UK target for renewable energy. It is a cheaper option than developing indigenous renewable sources. I think that that is a very strong statement to make, if I may say so. Great Britain is actually bringing in renewable energy from the Republic of Ireland. We are represented on the renewable trading steering group, and that is important, because what I do not want to see happen is it having an impact on our renewables incentives. The costs will be socialised across the United Kingdom, and our consumers will have to contribute. People may say, "What has this got to do with Northern Ireland?", but it will have an impact in Northern Ireland, because the costs are socialised across the United Kingdom. It is obviously something that we are keeping an eye on.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Will the Minister tell us what efforts are being made to better inform the demand side of the management of electricity and to encourage consumers to use electricity at times of lower demand?

Mrs Foster: That is a very important point, because, of course, we want to increase energy efficiency right across Northern Ireland. Last year, we undertook a campaign across all different sorts of media to try to encourage people to switch off appliances and to use them at appropriate times when demand is perhaps not as high. We will continue with that campaign, which was carried out through the interdepartmental working group that I chair. Energy efficiency is a critical part of our energy policy, and we will want to ensure that that stays at the forefront of everyone's minds in any discussion about energy policy.

Mr Allister: With Ballylumford B required to cease production in 2015 and Kilroot required to reduce production by 50% the next year, it is quite clear that we face a significant generating deficit in Northern Ireland. In those circumstances, why is there no urgency and no focus on a new generating plant in Northern Ireland and, indeed, on stabilising and

increasing the Scottish interconnector? Is the impression that the Department is quite disconnected and complacent about these matters unfair?

Mrs Foster: I know that the Member cannot help but make a snide comment. However, Northern Ireland will still have a 200 megawatt generation-capacity surplus after the decommissioning of the 510 megawatt of capacity at Ballylumford after 2015 and after further restrictions at Kilroot's generating units from the industrial emissions directive.

However, there is increased risk to Northern Ireland of a capacity deficit after 2021. By 2021 the Moyle interconnector will be fully operational and the new North/South interconnector should be commissioned. So, we are working with Mutual Energy to make sure that we have a short- to medium-term look at what is happening with the east-west connector. We are also pushing ahead with NIE on the North/South interconnector.

The regulator continues to work with SONI to establish the necessary security of supply margins from January 2016. That will inform the necessity and options for the provision of additional generation capacity at the least possible cost. That is the important point: least possible cost. Cost is an important element to this. If the Member thinks that I should just start up a new generating plant now, does he not think that that will have some cost implications for Northern Ireland and its consumers? That is always at the forefront of my mind. If I have to instruct for new generation capacity, I will do so, but we are not there yet. We are very much keeping a watching brief on this matter. One is certainly not complacent.

Exploris

4. **Mr Hazzard** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on her Department's role in providing financial assistance to Exploris aquarium, following her recent meeting with representatives of the Save Exploris group. (AQO 4943/11-15)

Mrs Foster: I had a very good meeting with Jim Shannon MP and representatives of the Friends of Exploris group on 21 October at which I confirmed that, since 1991, the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) has provided over £1.8 million of financial support to Exploris for capital, marketing and other schemes.

In considering the future of Exploris, there is a need to improve the commerciality of the

project for it to succeed in the long term, either in public or private ownership. Although there is currently no financial support available from the NITB to help Exploris, both the Tourist Board and Invest Northern Ireland are available to work with Ards Borough Council on marketing activity and business planning to increase the project's commerciality.

Mr Hazzard: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree with me that any loss of Exploris would represent a severe blow to not just the local tourism economy but the local economy as a whole in County Down and further afield? With that in mind, is she committed to doing all that she can to ensure Exploris's future?

Mrs Foster: I can say to the Member that the meeting with the members from Friends of Exploris was a very good one in so far as we were very frank with each other about what needs to happen to make Exploris a commercial entity and to take it forward into the future. It will look at different models and has different plans. I gave Friends of Exploris a commitment, which I stand by, that, when those plans come to us, I will look at them in as positive a way as I possibly can. So, we look forward to engaging with Friends of Exploris and, indeed, with other Executive colleagues on this issue.

Mr Nesbitt: What instructions has the Minister given her officials on the foot of last week's Assembly debate, which overwhelmingly endorsed the idea of Exploris as a regional facility that requires Executive support?

Mrs Foster: As I indicated in my previous answer, I await any proposals on that issue. I particularly await them to see their commerciality and their sustainability for the future. All of us want to make sure that Exploris gets the stay of execution lifted, but we want to see it lifted and not come back another day. We want to make sure that any saving of Exploris will make sure that it lasts into the future. Therefore, there is a need for it to be commercial and for the status quo not to be maintained.

Mr Anderson: The Minister will be aware that our councils financially support many tourist attractions throughout Northern Ireland. If the Minister was to give financial assistance to the likes of Exploris, would she also consider funding other tourist and leisure attractions throughout Northern Ireland?

Mrs Foster: The Member has put his finger on the issue very well. I will not name him, but one of the Belfast MLAs, of which there are many, so I am not pointing one of them out, said to me, "If Exploris gets funding, does that mean that Belfast Zoo can come and look for additional funding, because it is supported by Belfast City Council?" The important thing is that, if we are able to help and assist Exploris, we will do so in a way that will make it commercially viable and sustainable into the future so that it does not have to keep relying on public funds in the longer term.

Mr McCarthy: Will the Minister give the House an assurance that, if Friends of Exploris and Ards Borough Council come up with a commercially viable proposition for Exploris, her Department will not be slow or behind the door in supporting it with some financial regional support?

Mrs Foster: I said to the members of Friends of Exploris directly that I will be as positive as I can be when they bring forward any proposal, and I hope that they are able to bring that proposal forward in the very near future.

Sporting Events

5. **Miss M McIlveen** asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to outline the efforts her Department is currently making to secure major sporting events. (AQO 4944/11-15)

Mrs Foster: My Department, through the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, has undertaken significant work to secure major global events in Northern Ireland, including major sporting events. Indeed, the success of the Irish Open in 2012 and winning the Giro d'Italia for 2014 are two examples that highlight the success to date.

The overall aim of the events function is to support the promotion of major events in Northern Ireland that have the potential to impact positively on the image of Northern Ireland, including world-class international events that generate significant economic benefits by attracting tourists and international press coverage.

I recently approved NITB's new tourism events strategy 2020, which has a key focus on the bidding for and securing of major global sporting and cultural events to Northern Ireland. NITB will be working with other key stakeholders, in particular the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and Sport NI, and I encourage

those organisations to play their role in that regard.

Miss M McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer and congratulate her on how she is securing major sporting events and promoting Northern Ireland. Further to that, what assistance is she giving to the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) to support its bid to host the Rugby World Cup in 2023?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for those comments. I can confirm to her that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure and I had a very positive meeting with officials from Ulster Rugby and the IRFU. That took place within, I think, the past six weeks. We are very supportive of bringing that event to the island of Ireland, but we want to make sure that those of us who are Ulster Rugby fans see a tangible benefit for the people of Northern Ireland from bringing it to the island of Ireland. Making sure that we have some of the major matches in Northern Ireland is one of the key elements to ensuring that we can all enjoy the spectacle, and it would be a spectacle, of the Rugby World Cup.

Environment

Mr Speaker: We will start with topical questions.

Anaerobic Digester: Ballymena

1. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any concerns about the number of anaerobic digester applications — in particular, the anaerobic digester in the Ballymena area that will be fed entirely by chicken litter, which is the first of its kind — and to state how he can justify the current neighbour notification system, which has caused a lot of concern and suspicion among the local community about what could be safe and progressive technology. (AQT 331/11-15)

2.45 pm

Mr Durkan (The Minister of the Environment): I thank Mr Frew for his question. There are quite a number of applications in the system for anaerobic digesters. However, I am not familiar with the specific application to which the Member refers.

On the issue around neighbour notification, I believe that we, as a Department, need to look at how that is done to reduce and remove any

room for suspicion or paranoia among local communities about not just applications for anaerobic digesters but any applications at all. On the whole, anaerobic digesters are something that we should be supportive of; however, not in any place and not at any price.

Mr Frew: Is the Minister concerned by the lack of knowledge in the planning department on this type of anaerobic digestion? Is he minded to treat this type of application like wind farms, whereby he will bring it into the centre of the planning department?

Mr Durkan: Each application has to be treated and judged on its own merits. The applications for wind farms, to which he refers as being brought into the centre, are generally article 31 applications, and they are viewed as having massive regional significance. Should an application for an anaerobic digester be deemed to be of that scale and of that significance, it will be.

As regards a perceived lack of knowledge in the Department on how to process those applications, that is something that I will look at. It is imperative that our planning officers are fully upskilled and fully aware of every type of application that comes before them. I am confident that we have a very skilled workforce. However, technology changes and application changes, and it is vital, and I am determined, that the Planning Service changes to keep abreast of those developments.

Taxis: Single-tier Licensing System

2. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he fears that a single-tier licensing system would make the taxi industry less accountable, given that all taxis would be available to be hailed. (AQT 332/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat fá choinne na ceiste sin. Thank you for that question, Mr McMullan. The move towards single-tier taxi legislation was due to be complete by September 2013. However, with the agreement of the Environment Committee, my predecessor decided to postpone the implementation until September 2014 in order to give the industry and those within it time to prepare for the implementation so that its impact will be less onerous on operators and drivers, and it will be more affordable for them.

As regards the implications of the move towards a single-tier system on competition, I have met several dozen taxi drivers and representatives of taxi drivers and companies

and heard many concerns and views. It is complicated legislation, and it is important legislation, which will improve standards in the industry and improve accessibility, particularly for those with a disability. I am determined that we use the year that we have bought through postponing the implementation of the legislation to ensure that we get it right. I am happy to work with those representatives of the taxi industry and with Committee members to make sure that we make it as effective as possible.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has advice been sought from any other jurisdiction that has implemented a single-tier taxi system to establish whether it has been successful?

Mr Durkan: As I said, the legislation is complicated. I believe that it was the first legislation passed in this House, and the fact that we are here, five years after its passage, and it still has not moved anywhere, is an indication of just how complex it is and how important it is that we get it right.

There have been studies done of the taxi industry elsewhere. Every country and, indeed, most cities have their own particular taxi needs and issues. The case in point is Belfast, which we see as the place in the North that would be most severely impacted on by the introduction of the single-tier system. I suppose that Belfast public hire taxis fear what the impact might be on them. As I said, it is very important that we work together. I will also be working with my colleague the Minister for Regional Development on issues around ranks and bus lanes and how they can best be facilitated.

Mr Speaker: Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Climate Change

3. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he has any plans to introduce the daft and economy-destroying idea of his predecessor: a climate change Bill for Northern Ireland. (AQT 333/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Wilson. I am not sure that my predecessor had any daft ideas. He did have many daft ideas — *[Laughter.]* — but maybe not as many as some of my other predecessors. *[Laughter.]* However, climate change is a massive issue that we face. Regardless of differences of opinion about its cause, I think that all of us can now at least accept that it exists, and that the need to do something about it exists as well. The introduction of a climate change Bill might be

one way to address it, but, at this time, I am not 100% convinced that it would be the best way to address it. We need buy-in from all Departments, Members and sectors of the community, particularly the business community. At this time, I am more minded to favour a climate change strategy, where we get people on board, including those who might have reservations about a Bill, and make sure that we get them working towards reducing greenhouse gas and carbon emissions and making Northern Ireland a better place with regard to its environment and its level in European and world terms.

Mr Wilson: I am not too sure whether the Minister is accepting that it was a daft idea and if he is now trying to row back from it. I welcome his caution, at least. Does he accept that given the fact that there has been no global warming for the past 15 years, even though CO2 emissions have been rising, and that the Bill would affect farmers, businesses, jobseekers and the economy in Northern Ireland, it would be much better to move away from regulation and additional costs on businesses through trying to introduce such legislation at a time when, already, we are struggling for competitiveness in Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: Thank you for that supplementary question, Mr Wilson. I do not accept that regulation is necessarily bad for business. It is possible to create and strive for a better environment and a stronger economy. That is why it is so important that I, and we as an Assembly, work with those interests that Mr Wilson mentioned — those in agriculture, industry and the agrifood industry, in particular, which is so important to our local economy — in order to address their fears and their concerns. I do not particularly think that the logic that Mr Wilson is espousing is particularly helpful, nor do I accept that there has been no increase in global warming over the past 15 years.

Waste Management

4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of the Environment, given that the Northern Ireland landfill allowance scheme (NILAS) targets are fast approaching, whether he believes that the North West Region Waste Management Group application, which is the only application at the moment, is capable of being the only solution in Northern Ireland. (AQT 334/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Clarke for that question. The issue of waste, how we deal with it and the infrastructure that we have — or, to date, have

not — got in place to deal with it is very important. It is a burning issue in some constituencies, one could say, myself included. I have met the North West Region Waste Management Group, as I have others, individually and collectively. It is important that they work together, that the Department works with them and that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and local councils work with them to make sure that whatever solution to our undeniable waste problem we come up with is one that works.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his response. I note that he has met the North West Waste Management Group. However, the Arc21 group for the east of the Province is to consider an application for the Mallusk area. I know that my colleague is particularly interested in the ozone layer; but would a location in the Mallusk area not be more viable than transporting the goods from the Belfast area to the north-west?

Mr Durkan: As and when any waste management group submits to the Department a viable appointment business case, the Department will consider any case for funding on the basis of its assessment of the project's contribution to Northern Ireland's compliance with European landfill diversion targets. The Arc21 project comprises a combination of mechanical biological treatment and energy from waste through incineration. The remaining bidder for waste procurement recently announced its plans for the new facility in Mallusk, to which Mr Clarke referred, and it has been engaged in pre-application discussions with the Planning Service.

Sellafield

5. **Ms Ruane** asked the Minister of the Environment whether he is aware of the recent damning report on Sellafield from the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee and the dangers to people and the environment here in the North of Ireland. (AQT 335/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat. Mo bhuíochas as an cheist suimiúil sin. Thank you for that interesting question. I must plead ignorance on that. I am unaware of the report, but I will make it my business to read it and study its findings. I am fully aware of Sellafield and of the public concern about the dangers that it poses to them. I am fully determined to do anything within my remit as Minister of the Environment to mitigate such damage.

Ms Ruane: Bhuel, go raibh maith agat faoin fhreagra sin. Thank you for the response. I am a bit concerned that your Department did not make you aware of the report, and I welcome the fact that you will study it. I also ask you to make representation to the relevant authorities, because the report is damning and Sellafield is 10 years behind in terms of safety and waste.

Mr Durkan: I undertake to make the relevant representation. My party colleague the MP for South Down has been vociferous in her concerns and those of her constituents about Sellafield, so I give you my guarantee that I will look at it.

Mr Speaker: Jonathan Craig is not in his place for question 6.

Councils: Community Planning

7. **Mr Mitchel McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment how he intends to ensure strong and accountable community planning as part of the transfer of powers to the newly configured local councils. (AQT 337/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat fá choinne na ceiste sin agus déanfaidh mé mo dhícheall freagra a chur air. I thank the Member for his question, and I will do my best to answer it.

The transfer of powers to local councils is vitally important. A couple of weeks ago, we voted here to pass the Local Government Bill to Committee Stage, where it now sits. In fact, an extension to Committee Stage has been granted so that the Committee — I am sure that Mr Boylan is looking forward to it — can spend more time properly scrutinising it and making sure that it is fit for purpose. Community planning is a massive issue in that. It is a massive opportunity to empower local communities and local individuals to play an active role in shaping their own towns, cities and regions.

Through my predecessor, the Department acquired additional funding from the Executive to provide training and capacity building, not only for local councillors but, importantly, for local community groups and others interested in and vital to the community planning process.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes topical questions. We now move to questions for oral answer. Questions 1, 9 and 14 have been withdrawn.

3.00 pm

Anaerobic Digester: Sion Mills

2. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of the Environment for his assessment of the proposed location for the anaerobic digester in Sion Mills, beside an internationally renowned stretch of the River Mourne. (AQO 4956/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Jurisdiction on that proposal has passed to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) by way of a non-determination appeal. As part of the appeal process, the commission asked the Department to provide it with either draft reasons for refusal or draft conditions. The Department assessed the proposal based on the evidence that was available to it and has presented nine reasons for refusal to the commission. The commission has now asked all parties to submit statements of case by 17 December 2013. The Department is preparing a statement in support of the draft reasons for refusal. The planning appeal is to be dealt with by an informal hearing, which is to take place on 22 January 2014. By that stage, the Department will have received the statements of case from the appellant and interested third parties. The Department will consider the content of all those submissions, which may have an impact on the Department's assessment to date.

Ms Boyle: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his response. Does he believe that the volume and nature of traffic that would be required to service the proposed anaerobic digester would be conducive to the residential composition of the village of Sion Mills?

Mr Durkan: Ná habair é. I made a visit to the proposed site and have seen at first hand the road infrastructure in and around the site, and I met a dozen or so objectors. In total, 337 objections have been received about the proposal. As far as I am aware, many, if not all, of them referred to the traffic impact, should the proposal go ahead. Roads Service is a statutory consultee, and it will respond and submit its statement to the PAC. It will have seen the objections from residents and will carry out its own traffic impact assessment.

Mr Byrne: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Does he agree that Sion Mills is a good example of an industrial heritage village and that the tourism potential of an industrial heritage project could be jeopardised if an anaerobic digester were to be sited in the village?

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr Byrne, for that supplementary question. That issue was raised by community representatives when I visited Sion Mills on 21 or 22 August 2013. I am aware of the history and heritage in the Sion Mills vicinity. I am also aware of the determination of a group in that community to maximise the benefit of that built heritage to Sion Mills as a tourist destination. Therefore, I take on board the Member's concerns and those of the community. However, it will be up to the PAC to assess those concerns.

Lord Morrow: Before I ask my question, I declare that I am a member of the Sion Mills Angling Club, which fishes the River Mourne. I want to put that interest on record right away.

I listened carefully to the Minister's responses. Does he not feel that a river of the standing and calibre of the River Mourne deserves special protection and that that type of river, which is so important for the migration of salmon, should be protected from such a development? Will he carefully consider giving rivers of that nature special protection?

Mr Durkan: I thank Lord Morrow for his question. On the day that I visited Sion Mills, a member of the angling club was there and expressed some of those concerns. The area is, indeed, sensitive with regard to conservation not only for angling but potentially for wildlife. However, on initial assessment, the Department deemed that an environmental impact assessment would not be required. Objectors have raised that case and made submissions to the PAC.

As regards the future of the river, we will see how that runs. I will certainly take Mr Morrow's concerns on board. I will look at what is in those rivers and at how they can be best protected.

NIEA: Consultation Responses

3. **Mr Wilson** asked the Minister of the Environment what is the length of time for the longest outstanding final consultation response by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency to a planning application (AQO 4957/11-15)

Mr Durkan: The longest outstanding planning consultation response with the NIEA is for application S/2007/1372/O, which is for a mixed use development in Lisburn. This consultation was issued to the NIEA on 21 January 2009 following an initial consultation with Public Health.

Mr Wilson: I suspect that there are many other examples of three or four years' delay for the NIEA to respond to consultations. This is gumming up the planning system. Does the Minister believe that not just the NIEA but Roads Service and other consultees should be required to respond within a specified period otherwise it should be assumed that they have no comment to make, rather than holding up vital developments across Northern Ireland?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Wilson. As a previous Minister of the Environment, he is only too aware of how this works and how, in sadly too many cases, it does not work properly and fast enough. I am looking seriously at a new duty for statutory consultees to respond to consultations within a prescribed time frame as we move planning powers towards councils. That is something that I aim to pursue.

Mr Gardiner: Will the Minister explain whether any particular types of planning application are prone to longer delay, and can he give reasons for that?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Gardiner. Some applications are more complicated than others, and there are various reasons why some consultations take longer than others, such as previous land use. In the example I cited, which is the longest running case, the site had been used previously as an animal feed mill. Thus, the ground conditions on the site must be subject to detailed investigation to establish its suitability for the proposed end use, which included residential use.

There are a number of reasons why NIEA responses can be delayed. Officers dealing with complex cases need time to prepare appropriate and considered assessments of environmental factors. They may have to undertake necessary investigations, studies and/or evidence gathering before an assessment can be made and a consultation response prepared. This can lead to a delay in responding to planning, which may and does have a knock-on effect on the processing of applications by the Planning Service. However, although there are many reasons, there should be no excuses. There are certainly no excuses for a response to take as long as the case in question has done. I was shocked to see it, and I have instructed officials to make sure that the response is issued by the end of this week.

Ms Lo: The only independent member on the board of the NIEA finishes his term at the end of this year, and I understand that he is not being replaced. How does the Minister intend

to keep that independent view in the NIEA from next year?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Chair of the Committee for her question. I had a conversation with the outgoing independent NIEA board member a few weeks ago. He also raised those concerns, which were justifiable and understandable. It is important that there is more objectivity and a degree of independence in any board, and the NIEA is no exception. I will look at this as we move forward. The decision was made, but it can be looked at again and can be remade.

Exploris

4. **Mr McCarthy** asked the Minister of the Environment to outline the discussions he has had with Ards Borough Council in relation to supporting the Exploris aquarium. (AQO 4958/11-15)

Mr Durkan: Following the announcement by Ards Borough Council of its intention to close Exploris, I met the Member and a delegation from Friends of Exploris to listen to their concerns. At the meeting, I gave an undertaking to raise the matter with my ministerial colleagues and to task my officials to meet the council to learn more about the details of the proposed closure.

The meeting between officials and the chief executive of the council took place on 2 October, and further information was provided on the background to the decision, including previous private sector interest, costs and staffing implications. Information was also provided on the process and timescale for closing Exploris when the two-month stay of execution lapses on 25 November. On my direction, officials have since written to the council setting out a proposal for providing assistance to Exploris. The essence of the proposal is that one-off grant support may be available to help upgrade the facilities to attract more visitors and income, thus reducing the subsidy provided by the council. However, the proposal is dependent on three factors: first, that the council is open to the proposal in principle and is prepared to commit to Exploris in the long term; secondly, that the council prepares a business case justifying the public expenditure involved; and, thirdly, that ministerial colleagues are prepared to assist in the provision of a one-off capital grant, provided that they are satisfied with the business case made. My Department could not do this alone. The proposal will be placed before the council's development committee on 20 November, and any recommendation from that committee will

be considered by the council at its meeting a week later.

Alongside that, Friends of Exploris has commissioned BDO consultants to develop a business case for saving the centre that they intend to present to the council in advance of that meeting. That is a positive development, and I have asked my officials —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is gone.

Mr Durkan: — to join any discussions arranged to progress the business case.

Mr McCarthy: Mr Speaker, I am prepared to listen to the Minister all afternoon if he comes up with a positive response.

Mr Speaker: That is not possible.

Mr McCarthy: I thank the Minister for his reply and for his efforts at the Executive table to move this important problem forward.

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

Mr McCarthy: Following the cross-party support for Exploris that was given in the Chamber last week, has the Minister had receipt of any plans or vision for a sustainable future as yet for this priceless asset? Will his Department —

Mr Speaker: I must now encourage the Member to finish.

Mr McCarthy: Will his Department assist with regional funding to see Exploris enjoy a sustainable future?

Mr Speaker: The Member should take his seat.

Mr McCarthy: Mr Speaker, I am under enormous pressure to get the answer from this gentleman. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Speaker: Allow the Minister to answer.

Mr Durkan: Thank you, Mr McCarthy. Following the announcement by Ards Borough Council of its intention to close Exploris, I raised the matter with ministerial colleagues at the Executive Committee. As we are still in discussions, I am not able to say much more at this point. However, we still await a full and thorough business case from Friends of Exploris and the council on how we can save

this much-needed and much-loved facility. In the absence of that business case, I cannot give my Department's potential commitment to future regional funding. However, business case aside, I can state categorically that I would be committed to and favourable to allocating money to the seal sanctuary element of Exploris, which performs a vital role. It is the only place in the North of Ireland that does such a thing; the nearest other one is in Cork. The value of a seal sanctuary was mentioned in the press again today. Regardless of how the business case looks, my Department will fund a seal sanctuary, whether that be in Exploris or elsewhere.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. Has the Minister allocated any funding for the business case? Is he aware of any discussions with any other partners on the project, such as Friends of Exploris?

3.15 pm

Mr Durkan: I have not personally had those discussions. However, one of my officials has had many such discussions and continues to have them with both the council and Friends of Exploris. Where resources are concerned, that is what I have given. I have directed my officer there, and he is working closely and well with both the council and Friends of Exploris.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his answers. I am particularly taken by the fact that he suggests that his Department might be keen to support the seal sanctuary aspect. Could various Departments pick up on specific elements of Exploris' work? For example, could the Department of Enterprise support tourism, or could DCAL look at expanding cultural areas? Is that the way to provide regional support from the Executive for Exploris?

Mr Durkan: That would and will be dependent on the business case. What we as an Executive cannot do is pour good money after bad into a black hole. There is a cross-cutting element to this facility. It obviously has an educational value, it has a tourism value, and, through the work that it does with Queen's University, it has a role in further and higher education. However, in the absence of that business case or until we see a business case, the Executive are unable to commit to that sort of funding. My seal sanctuary pledge, if you like, is aside from that.

Partnership Panel

5. **Ms Maeve McLaughlin** asked the Minister of the Environment what role a local government association will have within any future partnership panel. (AQO 4959/11-15)

Mr Durkan: It will be a matter for the 11 newly formed councils, following their establishment in May 2014, to agree the role of a local government association on a future partnership panel. In the meantime, I have asked my officials to examine the partnership council in Wales, on which the Northern Ireland proposals are modelled, to ensure that the Department is fully briefed on how the Welsh council operates and functions.

In moving forward, it is my intention to engage with relevant bodies, including the political reference group, before I present fully worked-up proposals to the Executive for agreement on a future partnership panel. I will also put a position paper on the partnership panel's role to the regional transition committee meeting on 27 November, so that there is an informed discussion with the chairs of the transition committees, who will be responsible for briefing the new, incoming councils.

The Local Government Bill, which was introduced in the Assembly on 23 September 2013 and is currently at Committee Stage, provides for the establishment of the partnership panel in Northern Ireland. Clause 106 requires the Department to establish the panel, whose members, to be appointed by the Department, are to comprise Northern Ireland Ministers and members of district councils. Before appointing council members, the Department will be required to consult appropriate bodies that are representative of local government. The panel's functions will be to advise the Northern Ireland Ministers on matters affecting their functions; make representations on matters affecting or of concern to those involved in local government in Northern Ireland; and give advice to those involved in local government in Northern Ireland.

Ms Maeve McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat. I thank that Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that there are benefits to be had from the collective, corporate view that comes from local government as a sector?

Mr Durkan: Go raibh maith agat. I am aware of the value of having a representative body. Indeed, I told them that at the weekend, so I will not tell you any differently. I think that the panel

itself will have a very important role. It is therefore vital that we ensure that composition is just right. It will provide a forum for discussion at a political level of strategic matters of mutual interest and concern to central and local government. District councils and their representative body have, on a number of occasions, raised concerns about the lack of consultation on important policy issues, especially those that directly affect them. The panel will not only address that issue but will support the delivery of the Executive's vision for a new citizen-focused local government, particularly in the context of driving new initiatives, such as community planning.

National Park: Causeway Coast

6. **Mr McMullan** asked the Minister of the Environment for an update on a national park in the Causeway Coast and glens. (AQO 4960/11-15)

Mr Durkan: I am fully aware of national parks and the benefits that they can undoubtedly bring to areas, as they have done in GB and on this island. National park status is a globally recognised brand and, as a result, is a key draw in attracting tourists and ultimately boosting the local economy. Furthermore, national parks have a role in protecting and enhancing natural heritage. However, I am also aware of the opposition to national parks here in Northern Ireland and the concerns of landowners over what designation might mean for them. Given the level of that opposition, I do not believe that now is the correct time to proceed with national parks. I believe that some of the benefits associated with national parks can be derived from enhanced collaboration and partnership working on the ground between stakeholders, including, importantly, landowners and others who have expressed reservations about national parks. That stance applies to the Causeway Coast and glens and to other areas.

Mr McMullan: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will he now boldly go where the previous Minister failed to go — a public meeting — and explain the rationale for what he has told us here today in that now is not the time to proceed with the national park? Will he also now consider withdrawing the proposal completely, as was done for the Mourne?

Mr Durkan: I am certainly happy to attend such a meeting. I have received an invitation from Moyle District Council to attend a meeting on that very issue, but, to date, I have been unable to schedule it. My predecessor also attended

public meetings, though not every public meeting. I am happy to attend such a meeting and to explain my rationale to members of the Member's community and those from elsewhere.

Mr Speaker: I call Mervyn Storey.

Mr Storey: I trust that the Speaker has not forgotten my name so quickly.

Will the Minister take it from me, as someone who represents the area, that there is total and widespread opposition to the creation of a national park? Does he accept that it is unnecessary, expensive and dictatorial, as one individual has described it? Will his Department now work with the farming community in north Antrim in a way that is beneficial to the environment rather than proceed with what is proposed, which would clearly be to their detriment?

Mr Durkan: I thank Mr Storey for his supplementary question. In my opinion, the reason why opposition to national parks has been so strong and so vociferous is largely a fear of the unknown. My Department and I will happily engage with the farming community to which Mr Storey refers, but it is important that we do so on the basis of building partnership working on the ground not just with the farming community but with those who support national parks and recognise the value that they can bring to an area. It is important that that partnership approach is taken. Maybe, just maybe, people's opposition might reduce some time in the future. That is why I am not scrapping the national parks Bill, but I am shelving it.

Mr Kinahan: The Minister answered much of what I wanted to ask. Can we rely on him not to give up on the north coast and to find a good way forward that suits the environment, farmers, businesses and everyone else?

Mr Durkan: Absolutely. I remain convinced of the benefits of national parks; that has not changed. However, I have to recognise the depth of opposition to national parks and the difficulty of taking things further in the face of that opposition. This is not something that we can impose in any area; it has to grow from the ground in any area.

Recycling: Targets

7. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of the Environment whether recycling targets for local councils are being met. (AQO 4961/11-15)

Mr Durkan: There are currently no recycling targets set at local council level. The recycling targets associated with the European Union's waste framework directive are set at member state level. The waste framework directive requires that 50% of waste from households is recycled by 2020. Provisional data for Northern Ireland relating to the waste framework directive target, submitted as part of the UK rate, shows a recycling rate for waste from households of 41.6% for 2012. My Department also published a consultation paper in May 2013 seeking views on policy options for a recycling Bill that would contain powers to introduce a statutory recycling target for a local authority collecting municipal waste. The proposal is to set a 60% target for the recycling of all local authority-collected municipal waste by 2020. My officials are currently analysing the responses to the consultation, and I will consider that analysis before making any decisions on the preferred policy options.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for his reply. What specific measures will he take to ensure that the new 11-council model will indeed meet the targets that he has just described?

Mr Durkan: Thank you again, Mr Newton. It is important that I, as Minister, and we all, as Members, espouse the value of recycling and the importance of doing so. I have just published the new waste management strategy, 'Delivering Resource Efficiency', which seeks to change the focus of waste management from resource management to resource efficiency. That really means using our resources in the most effective way to minimise their impact on the environment and recognising the real value of our resources. In terms of increasing the rates of recycling across the council, my Department's Rethink Waste programme has, over the past few years, given out millions and millions of pounds in funding, and, where that investment has been made, we have seen improvement in the recycling rate. I want to do a closer analysis of that to see where we have the biggest return for that investment through success in boosting recycling rates.

Mr Dallat: Does the Minister agree that some of the best examples of reducing and recycling have come from our schools? Is it his intention to give that sector of our community greater encouragement, because is it not young people

who understand these things and then implement them in their adult life?

Mr Durkan: I was going to recycle my answer to the previous question, but I will not. Education is an extremely important tool in reducing waste and promoting recycling and in doing all such things to protect our environment and our planet. That is why I have put quite an emphasis on Eco-Schools since taking up post. I examined our list of Eco-Schools and saw where we were not doing well. I wrote, personally, to each of the schools that had not signed up, and, as a result, we have had a massive increase in uptake of maybe nearly 100 schools in the past month — so much so that my constituency went from being the worst represented in Eco-Schools up to fifth place.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of the Environment. Before we finish Question Time, I want to say that there are still some Members who, over a number of weeks, have not been in their place for Question Time and have not come to the House or even to my office to apologise. I expect Members who, for whatever reason, are not in their place during Question Time to at least give the House a reason or come to my office and give a reason. I often say to Members of the whole House that I am happy to listen to confessions here or in my office on all these issues.

3.30 pm

Committee Business

Child Protection and Safeguarding: Culture, Arts and Leisure Remit

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure into Gaps in Child Protection and Safeguarding across the Culture, Arts and Leisure Remit [NIA 140/11-15]; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Mr Irwin (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure): I support this important motion.

I would like to start by thanking Members for their contributions to the debate, and I join the Committee Chair in thanking the Minister for responding. As has been said by so many Members today, this is an extremely important issue, and it cuts across all Departments. I echo the Chair's thanks to the members of the Committee, the Committee staff and all the individuals and groups who contributed to the investigation, either with written submissions or by giving evidence before the Committee.

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

It is clear that the Committee's investigation report has proved to be a very valuable piece of work. I know that the Committee will work hard with the Minister to ensure that its recommendations are implemented. As has been said by many here today, the Committee's main purpose in undertaking the investigation was to look for gaps in child protection and safeguarding in the Culture, Arts and Leisure remit and then to seek out examples of best practice in the area. By putting those together, the Committee has developed a number of recommendations by which it hopes to close the gaps.

Throughout the evidence-gathering process, the Committee heard a good deal from individuals and organisations about the excellent work that is undertaken regarding protection and safeguarding across the CAL remit. Many here today have highlighted the great work done by the CPSU, and I also offer my congratulations to Paul Stephenson for the difference he has made in sport.

The Committee Chair referred earlier to private tutors and small groups operating across the CAL remit who are unregulated and unaffiliated. Those individuals and groups were very much in the Committee's mind when it decided to undertake the investigation. They are often unsure about protection and safeguarding issues, and the Committee believes that many of its recommendations will help them, particularly the Charter Mark standard. As the Chairperson has indicated, it will provide a beacon for protection and highlight recognised standards and best practice. It is to be hoped that this seal of approval will become something that the unregulated individuals and groups will feel that they need to be part of, as parents will ask them whether they belong to it. The Committee wants it to become a "must have" for anyone working with vulnerable groups.

At this point, I want to expand on what "vulnerable groups" actually means. It is a phrase that the Committee heard a number of times during the evidence sessions, and members engaged in a great deal of discussion about who exactly falls into that category. The Committee sees vulnerable groups as being inclusive of all children and young people; adults with disabilities, special needs or other vulnerabilities; and those with greater exposure to risk of harm. So often, when talking about protection and safeguarding, we forget adult groups. However, I am sure that all Members are aware of the media headlines around the abuse of adults in cared-for situations. In many ways, they are just as vulnerable as children and young people and, in some cases, more so.

One of the best ways that we can get the protection and safeguarding message across to those who need to hear it is through education and awareness campaigns. The Committee has made recommendations that will address that. In addition to the Charter Mark standard pilot, there will be an awareness-raising campaign. It is to be hoped that those will prove to be a useful way of reaching out to the self-employed persons and unregulated groups who work with vulnerable people. I stress that the Committee does not want to demonise the unregulated individuals and groups who work with the vulnerable. Members realise that, in the vast majority of cases, they simply want to do the best they can. The Committee's recommendations are designed to help them do that.

During the evidence-gathering process, the Committee reached out to local government. The Committee has made it a practice to engage with local government as a key partner

of the Assembly. Members understand that councils have considerable involvement in the activities undertaken with vulnerable groups and therefore councils have a vital role in helping to protect and safeguard them. The Committee believes that local government must be a partner in the process of standardising our approach to protecting and safeguarding vulnerable groups.

I am no expert on the internet or social media, nor do I have special expertise in the use of high-tech devices. However, I acknowledge, as did many Members during the debate, the huge role that they play in our daily lives. Through my constituency work, I have heard the worries of parents and teachers about the problems that the internet and social media can cause. Do not get me wrong, they can provide lots of benefits, but there are many dangers. In recognition of those dangers, the Committee has recommended that the Department play a full part in the Executive's development of an e-strategy and consider developing one of its own for the CAL family. The Committee Chair highlighted the need for a safeguarding portal. As she said, this would be a link from websites that people might use to get information about protection and safeguarding issues to up-to-date policy and procedural information.

In making its recommendations, the Committee was very aware that young people need to have a say in protection and safeguarding. The inclusion of their voice will promote greater relevance. Therefore, the Committee has recommended the establishment of a young person reference group. It would give young people a voice in key policies and strategies, including the development of policies and procedures for protection and safeguarding. Such a group might even be able to work on a virtual basis, as the Chair suggested. That would allow a considerable membership and reflect the way in which young people like to work. As the Chair said, a young person reference group could also be part of a Charter Mark standard pilot in the CAL sector.

The Committee is very much aware that it did not undertake the investigation in a vacuum. Members are all clear that a great deal of work is undertaken in other Departments and many organisations on the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups. Therefore, as the Chair said, the young person reference group should work with the existing frameworks for advice and cooperation to avoid duplication. It is to be hoped that the Committee's recommendation that the Department liaise with the Commissioner for Children and Young People on the establishment of the reference

group will mean that it does not duplicate the work of other bodies and that it is able to work closely in the networks.

As the Chair said and many Members repeated, we must not forget about the amazing work done by volunteers. We must also ensure that volunteers do not find that protection and safeguarding policies put them off the great work that they do. The tremendous volunteering during the recent World Police and Fire Games provided a wonderful example of how vital those people are to many activities. Much of what enriches the lives of vulnerable groups would not be possible without the help of volunteers. We must ensure that they are protected, too. We must ensure that volunteers are always kept in the loop and receive the best and most up-to-date training and retraining that we can provide. Knowing the correct policies and procedures and having a clear idea of where they can go for information and help will allow them to feel more secure as they undertake their important work.

We live in an ever-changing world. Technology is constantly moving on, and ideas about protection and safeguarding are, too. That is particularly true of the internet and social media. It is difficult to keep up with the latest trends in gadgets and popular social media sites. Parents, teachers and carers often feel confused about how best to protect those whom they look after from the negative aspects of the internet and social media. The availability of information and regular training is the best way to ensure that we do not fall far behind our young people.

The quality of the debate today reflects just how important the Committee's investigation has been. However, it is just the beginning. These issues do not stand still. The Committee looks forward to working with the Minister and her Department to ensure that the vulnerable in our communities get the best protection that we can give them.

Members made a number of very useful comments during the debate. I have divided them into broad themes: Charter Mark standard coordination and standardisation, internet and social media, and impacts on volunteers. Many of the contributors agreed that the development of a Charter Mark standard for protection and safeguarding was an excellent idea that deserved further consideration by the Minister. It could be developed in such a way that it is transferable to sectors beyond culture, arts and leisure.

Anna Lo described the Charter Mark as an innovative idea. The Minister considers that it would be a best practice standard that organisations aim for. Members were very supportive of the Committee's recommendation for an awareness-raising campaign to accompany a Charter Mark pilot. They also voiced support for the Committee's recommendations around a website link to inform on protection and safeguarding and a smartphone application that would offer the same access to information.

Members recognised the need for and benefits of a standardisation of policies and procedures and a coherent approach to the protection and safeguarding of vulnerable groups. Mr Ó hOisín commented on the support for the Committee's recommendation for a CAL conference every two years to discuss issues of protection and safeguarding. A conference such as that will allow the exchange of best practice and experience and promote standardisation across policies, procedures and training. Some Members also referred to the benefits of taking a cross-departmental approach to protection and safeguarding that could also include local government.

A number of members referred to the dangers presented by the internet and social media. At this point, I will respond to Mr Storey's query about whether the cyberbullying issues that are referred to in the report are linked to school-based internet access. The information in the Committee's report is based on the use of internet and social media on personal devices, but the Committee cannot state definitively that inappropriate activity does not happen using school-based equipment. That issue may require further investigation by others.

Members supported the development of an e-strategy by the Executive. Almost all contributors paid tribute to the excellent work of volunteers across all sectors. The Committee heard of examples whereby volunteers worked at their own expense to ensure that they were properly trained. Members expressed concern that this should be the case. It is possible that this kind of expense might deter volunteers, and Members highlighted this as an issue that needs to be resolved.

The Committee welcomes the Minister's clear support for the report and its recommendations. Indeed, she described the report as one of the most significant to have come before the Assembly in this mandate. The Committee also welcomes the Minister's commitment to talk to her Executive colleagues about how the recommendations can be taken forward. She

highlighted the potential for the Committee's suggested Charter Mark to become a best practice standard. The Minister highlighted the re-establishment of her Department's safeguarding working group. The Committee is pleased that the Minister and her officials have already begun work to support the Committee's recommendations.

Once again, I thank the Minister and all Members who contributed to the debate. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure into Gaps in Child Protection and Safeguarding across the Culture, Arts and Leisure Remit [NIA 140/11-15]; and calls on the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Private Members' Business

Insulation: Housing Executive Properties

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

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to initiate a review of the range of insulation materials used in Housing Executive homes, to assess the heat retention properties of the materials used and to maximise the cost effectiveness of insulating the homes.

We intend to accept the amendment. I brought the motion to the House after becoming aware through research carried out by the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) and the National Insulation Association (NIA) on around 20 Housing Executive properties in my constituency of North Down. This took place in the Bloomfield estate, the Kilcooley estate and Jubilee on insulation on current and former Housing Executive homes.

Through the research, it was discovered that every single property had serious flaws with their cavity wall insulation. The report on those 20 properties found a lack of proper cavity wall insulation in every case and a lack of proper loft insulation in some. I saw this at first hand by looking through a borescope, which is a camera that looks into cavity walls. I was able to see huge gaps in cavity wall insulation that had not been installed properly. In some cases, the loft insulation left a lot to be desired by not having the proper recommended depth of 300 mm, although I accept that the Housing Executive has a scheme in place to rectify that particular problem.

3.45 pm

The result of that poor workmanship has contributed to large patches of damp occurring in many of those dwellings, with one family having to paint a bedroom once a month on

average because it looked so bad, with black patches of damp on the walls. It was also affecting the health of their son, who suffers from asthma. I believe that this is only the tip of the iceberg in our Housing Executive stock, and I am sure that many Members will have examples to share from their own constituencies. It is leading to major repair problems for the Housing Executive and increased cost to residents who have to heat their homes, which are unable to retain their heat, plunging many into fuel poverty.

Northern Ireland's residents pay significantly more for their energy than the rest of the UK. Fuel poverty in Northern Ireland, at 42% in 2011, is well above the UK average of 19%. Although this is partly due to the greater reliance on home heating oil, there is no doubt that the number of properties with no cavity wall insulation or underperforming cavity wall insulation is a contributing factor. Proper insulation is vital, not just to combat fuel poverty but to help people's health during cold winters. At the root of many winter deaths are cold, badly insulated homes. With rising fuel prices, more and more older people cannot afford to heat their homes adequately. Warm, well-insulated homes would enable older people to stay healthier during the winter.

Some winters are worse than others. Progress is being made on death rates, which have fallen since the 1950s, largely due to warmer homes. However, with tens of thousands of excess winter deaths still recorded across the UK since then and many older people still having to live in cold homes, much more needs to be done.

Several studies across the UK have shown that excess winter deaths are linked to cold homes. Excess winter death rates are highest among those living in the coldest homes. For many older people, the problem is that they simply cannot afford to heat their homes properly, increasing their risk of serious illness or death. Over half a million older households in the UK are in properties that are hard to heat because of, for example, non-cavity walls or no access to mains gas. Improving the thermal efficiency of a dwelling can result in a large and sustained reduction in household energy costs.

The link between poor performance of insulated cavity wall dwellings and cold homes is quite clear. There is also a strong connection between cold homes and fuel poverty. It stands to reason, then, that the performance of cavity wall insulation in domestic housing plays a vital role in the determination of the full poverty calculations.

The report from SERC and the National Insulation Association on my constituency demonstrates that there is a fundamental problem with the quality and performance of some cavity wall insulation in some Housing Executive properties in Northern Ireland, and will highlight not only an industry solution to the problem but a number of other benefits, economic, social and environmental. Those benefits include boosting economic activity and tax revenues; creating jobs in the hard-hit construction sector; reducing greenhouse gas emissions; providing consumers with savings in their energy bills; tackling fuel poverty; and creating healthier and warmer living environments.

The worry of the increasing cost of keeping homes warm, or the thought for many of spending another winter in a house with damp, mould, condensation and the associated health risks, should be a thing of the past. A substantial programme of upgrading existing cavity wall insulation in Northern Ireland should be treated as a priority, part of infrastructure and capital strategy, consolidated in its funding and coordinated in its delivery. I believe that a review by the Housing Executive will make a strong case for investment in insulation to substantially increase the energy efficiency of our existing housing stock, which is often overlooked as a vital part of the economic infrastructure.

Using cavity wall insulation, where suitable, to reduce energy costs must always be the first port of call. It is unquestionably the most cost-effective treatment and energy reduction measure in any property. Investing in cavity wall insulation in Northern Ireland in fuel-poor households will have a similar or more positive macroeconomic impact than the equivalent stimulus package, either through increases in government current spending or government capital spending. If householders have to spend less on energy, then they are able to spend more on other products and services.

The result of the research by SERC and the NIA in my constituency, and any potential review by the Housing Executive, will point to a win-win scenario for Northern Ireland.

Any cavity wall insulation upgrade programme would have other advantages. It is shovel-ready and fast to mobilise and would stimulate economic activity and employment in all areas of Northern Ireland. It would reduce expenditure on treating cold-related illnesses, such as respiratory and coronary diseases. There is an opportunity for Northern Ireland to lead the way on such a programme of cavity

wall insulation upgrade, which has not been attempted on such a scale anywhere else in the world. At a higher level, there are benefits to society via health, job creation and the economy, whereby spending less on energy means that the public can spend more on other goods and services. That is one message, but it will of course need the cooperation of several Departments. We need joined-up thinking. A public health message linking cold, damp homes to respiratory problems could be pushed by the family GP. A prescription for insulation is a simple message to understand.

As for the social benefits of energy efficiency programmes to help alleviate fuel poverty, we should look at the conclusions of Dr Brenda Boardman of the Environmental Change Institute (ECI) at the University of Oxford. She said:

"this is a fantastic job creation scheme'. It is a great way to ... revitalise the whole economy, because when you do work on a building virtually none of the money is exported. You are not importing loft insulation or anything, it's all here, and at least half of the funding is labour costs and that's taking people off benefits, it's providing some income tax for government".

That would require the right political framing, since most people have yet to realise how satisfying it can be to live in an energy-efficient house. Dr Boardman sees that as a contribution to future generations. She continued:

"The Victorians built us sewers and underground tube lines. Our ancestors have given us wonderful legacies with their transformations of infrastructure. What infrastructure should we be changing? The housing stock, the building fabric, to ensure that it is fit for another century would be a good choice ... up to two-thirds of the benefits from energy efficiency improvements are non-energy related: they are benefits to health and the calibre of the housing stock."

The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has existing relationships with contractors and surveyors, and it could begin work, if it chose to, with its stock of 90,000 homes, giving a boost to any potential scheme at its early stages. The Northern Ireland Executive's constrained Budget would not allow them to finance the scheme alone. For that reason, we should look at international examples of state-led initiatives to leverage private capital into such projects. Once again, we do not propose

establishing any new agencies or complex systems of bank finance. Proposals have been made that would allow the Housing Executive to borrow through a bond insurance, similar to that undertaken by municipal and local councils in many other countries.

The impact on employment in Northern Ireland would be significant. It is estimated that every £10 million invested would create up to 330 jobs in Northern Ireland. Of course, any potential scheme could not, by any stretch of the imagination, eliminate unemployment, but it could provide employment for people in their local area once trained in the skills of cavity wall insulation. The proposal seeks to demonstrate that, even with severely constrained budgets, there are still options open to boost investment and growth in our economy. A real recovery will require more imagination and bold policymaking. This proposal seeks to begin that debate.

What better time to reduce fuel poverty? What better time to make our Housing Executive stock more energy-efficient? What better time to reduce the repair budget of the Housing Executive? What better time to reduce fuel bills for the most vulnerable in our society? What better time to make our population's health better and save lives? If you believe as I do, we must show leadership and grasp this opportunity with both hands by asking for a review. Deliver for our people. Support the motion.

Mr Agnew: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the second "used" and insert:

"and to ensure that they are environmentally sustainable and provide value for money over their lifespan."

This is possibly the fourth debate that I have taken part in that focuses to a large degree on fuel poverty. Energy efficiency in our housing is absolutely key to tackling fuel poverty, as well as, as was mentioned by the Member who spoke previously, reducing the release of CO₂ emissions. Indeed, there is potential for job creation through public investment in that area.

Energy efficiency is the best way in which to tackle fuel poverty. At the minute, as Members will know, the UK parties are crawling over one another to see who can promise the lowest energy prices. I think that we should be very sceptical about those promises. The fact is that oil and gas prices will continue to rise,

regardless of government interventions. In fact, although not powerless, the Government can have little impact on energy prices. However, they can invest in energy efficiency. So, I think that we have to accept that cheap energy is not an option, but reducing our reliance on energy through energy efficiency is an option in which the Government, whether at UK level or locally through the Executive, can play a large part.

I argue that Northern Ireland's housing stock is in a particularly bad state. Northern Ireland has more excess winter deaths per head of population than Finland. Bearing in mind that Finland can see winter temperatures between anywhere as low as -25°C and -50°C, it seems very strange that we suffer greater health problems due to cold weather than people in Finland, where the sea literally freezes over during some winters. Santa's home in Lapland could be warmer than our constituents' homes in Limavady or wherever. It is something that we have to take seriously and tackle.

The proposer of the motion referred to fuel poverty levels. Whether it is 44%, or whatever the exact figure is, we know that our fuel poverty levels are much too high to be considered acceptable. Again, as the Member who spoke previously said, housing is a key part of our infrastructure. However, I do not think that it is given the same attention as other areas of our infrastructure. I argue that our housing infrastructure is in a much poorer state than many of our roads, yet we pay so much attention to and invest so much in roads and see them as a key part of public investment, but I do not think that we have the same focus on our housing infrastructure.

With all due respect to schemes such as the warm homes scheme and the Northern Ireland sustainable energy programme (NISEP) grants, they are a piecemeal approach to tackling what is a structural and strategic issue that needs to be dealt with.

We need to ensure that building regulations ensure that we no longer build substandard, poorly insulated homes. I think that we have further work to do on that. Technologies and processes are improving all the time, and we need to make sure that our building regulations keep up with those and ensure that we are not, on the one hand —

Mr F McCann: I thank the Member for giving way. You mentioned house-building standards. However, is it not the case that we recently lowered house-building standards and that that is storing up trouble for the future? This debate relates only to the Housing Executive, but the

whole issue is much wider than just Housing Executive houses.

Mr Agnew: I thank the Member for his intervention. I absolutely agree. The debate concerns the Department for Social Development (DSD) for public housing and the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) for private building. We need to ensure higher standards through legislation and put in a statutory regulation to make sure that we do not allow unregulated building or low regulations on the one hand, with, on the other, the public purse later having to fund retrofitting to make up for poor building quality.

At any time, only 1% of our housing stock will be new homes. The motion focuses on existing Housing Executive homes, which I think require particular attention. I thank the proposer for tabling the motion. The survey of Housing Executive homes took place in our constituency, and it found the problems that he outlined. That has caused great concern among those communities, and I continue to be engaged with the matter.

The reason that I proposed the amendment — I thank the proposer of the motion for his support — is that I want to make sure that the review is as broad as it can and should be. When we look at the cost-effectiveness, as outlined in the motion, I want to make sure that we are not just talking about the upfront price of the materials and that we take into account the longer-term costs. So, when we look at insulation, we must recognise that the cost is not just the price of the materials and the installation, we also have to consider the beginning-of-life and end-of-life costs of energy use. There is not much point in trumpeting the improvements in energy efficiency of a particular type of insulation if it is very energy intensive in its production or disposal. So, we need to take those things into account, but I am clear that any insulation will save energy over its lifetime. We need to ensure that we maximise those savings.

4.00 pm

The impacts of materials used and how they affect a homeowner's health should be taken into consideration. Again, we are promoting the health benefits of a better insulated, warmer and less leaky home, but we need to ensure that we are not putting hazardous materials into people's homes that may affect breathing ailments, such as asthma. Professor Tom Woolley, an architect who specialises in sustainable building, says:

"We rely far too much on glues, sealants, membranes and so on which are synthetic, toxic, pollute the environment and often make disassembly very difficult."

It is the toxicity in particular that concerns me. In this review, we must look at the impacts that the insulation materials have.

Equally, with longer-term costs, we are putting in materials that, as Professor Woolley points out, are difficult to disassemble, cannot be recycled and could be sent to landfill. While it may not be the Minister's Department that pays landfill costs upfront, through council rates or taxes, those will be costs to the public purse in general, so we must take into account the lifecycle costs.

There is a vast array of insulating materials, whether they be petrochemical based, based on recycled materials or natural products. New products are being developed all the time, and the review must look at those different products because, while most loft insulation installers use fibreglass, it is by no means the only option. Through public procurement, perhaps we could look at different materials that may be better for environmental sustainability and lifecycle costs. Perhaps then we can drive innovation in that field and improve the options for homeowners who wish to fit insulation other than the fibreglass product. That could be a benefit.

The more you learn about insulation, the more complex it becomes. Any review needs to be carried out by somebody with the necessary expertise. As I said, the review should look at lifecycle costs of materials as well as taking a holistic look at environmental impacts.

I support the motion, because the particular issue with insulation in Housing Executive homes is an important one to bring forward, but it needs to be part of a wider strategic look at our housing stock.

I cannot finish my speech without mentioning my regret that the green new deal programme was not funded or implemented to look at this issue across our housing infrastructure.

I support the motion and thank the Member who proposed it for bringing it to the House.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment, which has been accepted by the DUP. I thank the Members who tabled the motion, because it is very timely as we move into another winter in which many

people are facing major difficulties from a lack of insulation in housing.

All of us have visited people who suffer the serious problem of a lack of insulation in their home. I understand that you can expect that in houses pre-1919 or pre-1945 or 1946 or even from the 1960s, but I believe that it is intolerable that people in homes built more recently face the same problems as those in older dwellings. Although the thrust of today's debate is focused on Housing Executive properties — I agree that there are problems in those properties — they are not exclusive in facing those problems, and failure to find a strategy that deals with all housing, including housing association homes and homes that are privately owned, is storing up major problems for the future.

In the past, I have spoken to the Minister regarding certain areas where houses have been built in the past 10 years. People bought those houses in the anticipation that they were their dream home for their future and the future of their children only to find out that the level of insulation in their home has made their life a nightmare. The developer has gone into receivership and left the residents, who live on the outskirts of west Belfast, dealing with serious problems. I understand that the Minister has met the Mount Eagles ratepayers' group, which is lobbying to get help, as its members have had to endure atrocious conditions because of the poor insulation in their homes. I believe that that situation is replicated across the North in many housing developments where residents have been left with no financial ability to rectify the problems.

I understand the difficulties with Housing Executive properties, but let us not forget the thousands of people who live in their own home and cannot afford to rectify the problems created by developers. We need to look at how those people are helped and to look at legal redress in respect of those who sold the houses, those who inspected the houses and cleared them as being OK and those who installed the insulation in the first place. I have spoken to a company that has inspected houses in Mount Eagles, and it has said that they are among the worst that it has seen. It went on to say that houses close by, belonging to housing associations, have serious problems with the level of insulation. Although those are relatively new houses in the Lagmore area, there are serious grounds for concern. The problem is not confined to Housing Executive properties. Over the years, I have seen serious problems caused by poorly insulated housing, and, when residents complained, they were blamed for not keeping their windows open.

I recently visited homes that are just 20 years old and have serious problems with poor ventilation, which has led to fungi growing. The walls are black with dampness. Those conditions must be having an effect on those living in the houses. I have got into arguments with housing officials about the difference between condensation and dampness. To be honest, to a tenant it makes little difference; their house is cold and wet. All they know is that their children are coming down with illnesses because of those problems, and to be told to open your windows and it will be all right does not convince a person if it is raining or -15°C.

I recently visited a house in my constituency where the woman of the house had been complaining about dampness in her home. It was a relatively new house, and she was complaining about problems in the living room, kitchen and upstairs bedroom where her young daughter slept. Many of the walls were black with damp, and there was some growth on the walls. She was constantly informed that she needed to keep a constant flow of fresh air through her house. The room that had the biggest problem was the child's room. On the wall was an extractor fan that was supposed to deal with air flow. When the family checked behind it, on the bedroom wall, there were six small holes, which went nowhere.

Across all our constituencies, similar problems exist. I have no doubt that it is worse in rural constituencies where much poorer housing conditions exist. While I support the efforts of Members to deal with problems in Housing Executive stock, the problem is much wider than that. Any review or strategy developed needs to be widened to deal with all housing. We need to protect vulnerable tenants, no matter what housing sector they live in.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member should bring his remarks to a close.

Mr F McCann: That includes the private rented sector, which escapes the scrutiny of many of these reviews. It is unregulated and in receipt of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money. I support the motion as amended.

Mrs D Kelly: I welcome the Minister's attendance at the debate, and I hope that he will be able to address a number of the issues raised by Members across the Chamber. I do not believe that there is much that any of us are in disagreement on in relation to either the motion or the amendment. It is something of a no-brainer to link poor insulation and poor

heating with poor health outcomes. Some Members have made important contributions recognising the potential not only for health improvements but for job creation and reducing the carbon footprint.

I lend my voice to that of Mr McCann in using the Mount Eagles residents' plight as an illustration of houses that were built as recently as the past three to 10 years. I know that there has been correspondence with the Minister from the residents' association in relation to their particular difficulties. I appreciate that some of the remedies are within the gift of his colleague the Minister of Finance, who has responsibility for building control. There appears to be a strong argument for the improvement of building control regulations, particularly the inspection regime in and around the types of materials and levels of insulation used.

It is my understanding that in Mount Eagles, where 25 bags of insulation ought to have been used, only seven were found to have been used. The Minister will know that that scheme has been closely examined and investigated by scientists from Queen's University and the University of Ulster. So, as Mr McCann pointed out, it is not the case that it is only houses that are quite old and from early in the previous century that are proving to be difficult and in which heating is a drain on a family's finances; it includes some that were built as recently as three to 10 years ago. The Minister may well be aware that, under NHBC, insurance in relation to insulation covers only an 18-month period. That is something that may well be looked at in any review.

In relation to tackling fuel poverty in its broadest and widest sense, there needs to be a much more holistic examination. It is not enough to insulate and then to look at a boiler scrappage scheme. If we are going to do a house, we should try to do it in a holistic way so that when you leave each home, you leave it in the most energy-efficient circumstance that is available to that tenant. Therefore, Minister, if you are of a mind to look at reviewing the insulation, I ask that you do so not just in terms of warm homes or cavity wall insulation but look at —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr F McCann: Steven made a point, although he went round the world and ended up in Santa's grotto to make it. He said that there was good practice elsewhere, and if we tapped

into that good practice a lot of the problems would be resolved.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. Mr McCann is right. I believe that there are different regulations in England pertaining to the type of insulation materials and the inspection regime, which, I am sure, could be easily amended and introduced here.

As the Minister well knows, there are people who bought their house at the height of the market in good faith and are left with a home that is damaged because of condensation, damp and spores, particularly in the Mount Eagles project. They have been abused badly by the system and the failures within it. I do not know whether there is anything the Minister can do in speaking to his colleague the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, who is responsible for insolvency cases; I do not know whether there is any way in which residents can seek redress. I appreciate that it is probably at the back of a very long queue in terms of bankruptcy proceedings, but it may be something that the Minister could raise with his colleagues.

There is little to be added to this argument. As I said at the outset, it is something of a no-brainer with regard to trying to improve the welfare of our people and in job creation. I am keen to hear if the Minister will take forward such a review and what the parameters of that review and any other projects or pilot schemes that his Department is currently undertaking would be.

4.15 pm

Mr Kinahan: I welcome the opportunity to speak to the motion and am happy to support it and the amendment. Like many others who have spoken, I have seen many of the problems of condensation and damp in houses. I praise my local Housing Executive for its excellent work, although it is sad that we have to put it under pressure at times. That is normally due to lack of resources.

The energy efficiency of a building and the efficiency of its heating source are often the difference between a household being in fuel poverty and not. As energy prices rise, improving energy efficiency is one of the few alternatives that can be used to offset a hike in fuel bills. Of course, there is also a significant health benefit from keeping a home warm. It is

also worth highlighting, however, that, although the 2004 fuel poverty strategy included a target of eradicating fuel poverty, regrettably, the 2011 strategy did not.

Regrettably, the energy efficiency of many homes across Northern Ireland remains outdated, and, disappointingly, the problem is often much worse in the social rented sector than in the private and owner-occupied sector. There has been good progress with Housing Executive stock over recent years, but there is still much work to do. We know that double glazing has a huge impact on the efficiency of properties, so it was disappointing that it was mired in controversy earlier this year. We feel that the Minister's intervention caused the significant delay that we all saw threaten the livelihood of many installation firms across the Province. I ask him today whether he has achieved the scale of saving that he initially perceived.

Of course, as we have heard, there are ways to make a house more efficient other than changing the windows and, in many cases, the whole surrounds. The boiler replacement scheme has strong support from my party, particularly following the revision of its eligibility criteria, which opened it up to more working households. Although it happened a couple of years too late, in my opinion, it was better late than never. The Minister should also consider rectifying the problems that single-skin walls or "no-fines houses" present, and I am aware that he has already asked the Housing Executive to develop a programme in that regard. However, in the strongest terms possible, I urge the Minister to ensure that he handles that issue thoughtfully and openly. Will the Minister, therefore, tell us today whether he believes that he, his party or any of its elected representatives, including councillors, have had or could have any conflict of interest in the provision or advocacy of provision of insulation to external walls? The current Minister for Social Development has allowed himself to be surrounded by a cloud of suspicion, so I encourage him to tread carefully on the matter.

The warm homes scheme is the other issue that I will focus my remarks on. Although not applicable to social housing, it is the Department's primary policy for improving the efficiency of privately rented and owner-occupied low-income households. The annual target to install improvements in 9,000 properties has been met consistently for the past number of years. However, I suggest that the Minister, rather than resting easy in the knowledge that targets are being met, review the scheme to see whether there is a case for

new ambitious targets or for even more fundamental reform.

My party has called for significant reform in the past. In 2011, we launched a policy document that called on the Department for Social Development to consider the Kirklees model as a potential way forward for the insulation of properties, social and private. In Kirklees, the warm zone scheme that ran between 2007 and 2010 was one of the biggest ever home energy improvement programmes in the UK. An often repeated fact is that, in the time that it took Kirklees to help over 50,000 households, the warm homes scheme in Northern Ireland helped fewer than 30,000 households for three times the budget. Therefore, Minister, while acknowledging the success of our scheme, I encourage you to consider what the benefits of reforming it would be.

I support the motion, and I support the amendment, although we must always be careful to ensure that we balance finding the environmentally sustainable way forward and the cost of giving people warm homes.

Mr Dickson: I thank Mr Easton and his colleagues for tabling the motion.

Insulation remains an extremely important issue given that, since 2009, the average price of home heating oil has increased by 62%. Gas bills in the greater Belfast area alone are up by 38%. We have the largest proportion of households using oil in western Europe, with some of the highest levels of fuel poverty.

A specific issue has been raised about problems with wall insulation, particularly condensation and damp. Reference was made to a number of housing areas where those problems are prevalent. In Northern Ireland, we are in a difficult position because most homes are exposed to high levels of wind-driven rain, and most, if not all, forms of wall insulation seem to cause some risk of damp. As was noted — indeed, it received a great deal of publicity recently — insulation work in several housing areas was not completed properly and/or piles of damp insulation fibre were being found at the bottom of cavity walls. One would expect that insulation that was installed as far back as the 1980s or 1990s would start to deteriorate, but, when a home is 10 years old or less, serious questions arise about the material and the job that has been done. Perhaps the Minister could clarify whether there is any evidence that the insulation material itself is substandard or that the companies made false or misleading claims about the standard or effectiveness of materials in order to gain

housing contracts. Are we simply looking at cases of bad workmanship? Have the homes been properly rendered? Has the insulation been installed at all? It is alarming to note stories of work not having been completed despite having been signed off as completed. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive needs to do an urgent audit of all properties in order to know for sure whether jobs that are registered as done have actually been done. What is the current check rate for that? There is also a role for building control staff. Building control fees are paid, but are inspections done, and are they thorough enough? There should be 100% checks to ensure that public money is spent on work that is actually completed and completed to a high standard.

The retrofitting of existing housing stock can improve energy efficiency and create and sustain jobs in the construction sector. A lot could be achieved with a coordinated and ambitious approach that effectively implements a range of energy-efficient measures. Cavity wall insulation is only one of those measures. It has been demonstrated, for example, that loft insulation can provide substantially more or better insulation than even that of cavity walls. As of 2012, the Minister confirmed that 60,000 Housing Executive stock needed to have their loft insulation brought up to a 150 millimetre standard, a standard that, I understand, has correctly been increased in size since then. Nearly 15,000 houses are waiting for double glazing. It is clear that we have a long way to go before we see all housing stock meeting appropriate energy efficiency targets.

Should alarm bells also be ringing in the private sector and among both ex-Housing Executive stock owners and anyone who has had cavity wall insulation fitted? Is this yet another scandal waiting to happen?

Alliance will support the motion today, but we would also welcome further clarity about how sustainability factors into the proposer's views of cost-effectiveness. We support Mr Agnew's amendment, which makes it clear that sustainability and value for money must run hand in hand. So, too, must the truth. We need to know what work was done and what was not done.

Mr Campbell: Like everyone else, I support the motion as amended.

Fuel poverty has dogged society in recent days, principally for the reason that was probably outlined best by the Member for North Down, which is increasing fuel prices. Recently at Westminster, at Prime Minister's Questions and

throughout the nation, the issue of how best to manage the cost during a cold winter, particularly for homeowners and even more so for the elderly, has been the major issue.

It is true to say that, for example, the Scandinavian countries — Mr Agnew mentioned Finland — have exceptionally expensive but excellent high-quality insulation, whether it is triple-glazed windows or really high-specification cavity wall and roof space insulation, which means that the basic main heat source is minuscule. The quality of the insulation is so high that only a very small amount of heat is required to heat the home. The problem, of course, is that the provision of that exceptionally high-quality insulation and all those extra measures is extraordinarily expensive. Nonetheless, it works, and if it works we should endeavour, so far as we can, to replicate that type of scheme. Other Members have mentioned the warm homes scheme. I have been a strong supporter of that scheme and, so far as it has gone, it has been very effective. However, we need to get more resources to make it more effective.

I take issue with the Member for North Down. I am not targeting him; it is just that he said a few things that I oppose. He offered some mild criticism of the NISEP scheme, which is due to end at the end of November. Again, it is an excellent scheme because anyone over 70 years of age on an income of less than £576 a week — how many senior citizens do we know who earn more than that? — can get free loft insulation up to 300 mm, free cavity wall insulation, a free hot water tank jacket and free low-energy lightbulbs.

Mr Agnew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Campbell: If he is going to recommend that everyone should take it up I will definitely give way.

Mr Agnew: Absolutely. I have promoted the warm homes scheme and the NISEP scheme to my constituents, and I agree that they are of value. My point was more about the efficiency of having the NISEP scheme, the warm homes scheme, the boiler replacement scheme and the double-glazing scheme. We need a more coherent, strategic approach to housing infrastructure and energy efficiency.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Campbell: Thank you for that. You should listen to these words, because you probably will

not hear them very often: I agree with the Member for North Down. *[Laughter.]* We will have to get those words recorded for ever and a day. I agree with him if he is talking about a coordinated approach.

This is an exceptionally important issue. Over the next four or five months, we will all come across dozens, if not scores, of elderly people in our constituencies who will be faced with the conundrum that we all know is just a cliché but has a high resonance: heat or eat? It is a very real problem that will be faced particularly by elderly people. I commend the Minister for the steps he has taken in recent years. Whatever difficulties there are in front of him, I am sure that he will grapple with them and overcome them. However, we have to try to get the resources that are necessary to put in place very significant insulation in the homes of vulnerable people in communities across Northern Ireland. I strongly support the motion, and I hope that it will get the unanimous endorsement of the Assembly so that we can see a much better future, particularly for those vulnerable elderly people.

Mr Brady: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. I support the motion and the amendment. Most things have been said at this stage in the debate but I have some points to make.

It has been only about four years since the Saville report told us that we had among the best social housing in Europe. Of course, the retention of that standard, and particularly the decent homes standard, was predicated on the provision of adequate maintenance. Unfortunately, that has not been happening in many areas. There are huge gaps in provision, which Mr Easton mentioned. Obviously, if you do not have proper insulation, you will have a lack of heat retention.

4.30 pm

We have increasing fuel poverty. The warm homes scheme and the boiler replacement scheme have been mentioned, and they are effective. However, they could be more effective, and they need to be targeted at the people who are most deserving of them. Some 70% of social housing here has oil-fired central heating. Therefore, if those homes are not insulated properly, the cost can be prohibitive. Over 2,000 older people in the North have died of cold-related illnesses from 2003 until now. There is continuing dampness, which causes health problems. In the past, I have had arguments with the Housing Executive,

because, if you had Niagara Falls in your living room, it would still tell you that it was condensation and do very little to alleviate the problem. Older houses in rural areas are more difficult to insulate. Some do not have cavity walls, so it becomes increasingly difficult to deal with the problem.

Some very interesting information has come from the Mount Eagles Ratepayers Association. It says that a report was presented to Minister McCausland in which academics from the University of Ulster at Jordanstown (UUJ) confirmed that, after retrofitting of cavity wall insulation — extraction of insulation and then refilling — in two properties, there was a 30% improvement in heat and comfort levels. Homeowners also reported that the mould had not returned and that their homes were significantly warmer and retained the heat for a much longer time. At present, there is no energy efficiency scheme available to remedy defective cavity wall insulation. Rightly, therefore, the academics are saying that an innovative solution is available whereby the old defective insulation is removed by vacuum and refilled using the latest grey bead cavity wall insulation. That may be something for the Minister to consider. Benefit cuts will mean that the most vulnerable will find it increasingly difficult to heat their home. Therefore, proper insulation is more important.

Mr Campbell mentioned the free services available. However, I make the point that, no matter how well insulated your house is and no matter how well it works, if you cannot afford to put fuel into your tank, the only thing that the insulation will do is retain the cold. That is an important point worth making. If the personal independence payment replaces the disability living allowance and up to 20% of disabled people lose their disability living allowance, more and more vulnerable people will suffer.

In my constituency a few years ago, there was a pilot scheme to introduce and build passive housing. That would have meant that houses were built with the whole insulation agenda properly in mind. Unfortunately, the Housing Executive ran out of money at the time, so the scheme did not progress.

Mr Campbell also mentioned Scandinavia. I talked to people who were involved in the warm homes scheme and went to Scandinavia to see passive housing. When it was -25° outside, the houses were so well built that the minimum of heating was needed. Obviously, there is a bigger outlay involved, but it is worth it in the long run. If the money is put into that and proper cognisance is given to what might

happen if those houses were built, we would not have the same problems. Nevertheless, we have to bear it in mind that, although there have been some increases in the use of insulation, people in social housing still have health problems and problems with heating. They are still suffering from fuel poverty. You cannot divorce fuel poverty from poverty. Again, I reiterate: benefits cuts can only increase poverty and fuel poverty.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): First, I want to thank all the Members who contributed to the debate. If my response fails to address any specific points, I will, of course, write to them separately.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the motion. At the outset, Members will be aware that one of the commitments in the Programme for Government is to improve the thermal efficiency of Housing Executive stock and to ensure full double glazing in properties. I intend to see that commitment achieved by 2015.

By way of background, I thought that it might be useful to reflect on the history of the Housing Executive's stock. At its inception in 1972, the Housing Executive inherited a large stock of existing properties from the then local councils and the Housing Trust. Those dwellings included properties that were built of solid wall, aluminium panels, concrete orlits and cavity wall construction.

During the next 24 years until 1996, the Housing Executive continued to increase its housing stock by constructing newbuild housing of varying construction types. In the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the construction industry began to acknowledge the benefits of good insulation in homes for reducing heat loss. Therefore, in the early 1980s, the Housing Executive introduced cavity wall and roof space insulation into its standard specification for all newbuild housing. However, the requirement for cavity wall insulation was not made compulsory in building regulations for newbuilds until the early 1990s, which is approximately 10 years after the Housing Executive introduced it as standard.

Turning to the theme of the motion, I will cover some recent developments regarding the insulation of its properties that the Housing Executive has been involved in. For example, the Housing Executive recently provided external wall insulation to three rural cottages outside Coleraine. That cost just under £13,000 a unit and included 200 millimeters of external insulation, new doors, windows, rainwater goods and fascias, and warm-deck

roofs to two of the properties with a side extension. It is now monitoring the dwellings' performance over the coming winter season.

Following on from that pilot scheme, the Housing Executive is currently at the start of a larger and more detailed analysis of its no-fines concrete properties. It was approached by the Building Research Establishment (BRE), which is facilitating the latest round of the Technology Strategy Board research and development funding titled 'Scaling up retrofit of the nation's homes' to ascertain the Housing Executive's willingness to participate as a partner. It considers that the Housing Executive's mix of stock and technical challenges, such as lower densities, the gas/oil network, fuel costs etc would give the proposal a unique selling proposition.

BRE is keen to have a project in Northern Ireland focusing on no-fines, solid-wall homes, as there are some 5,600 in Northern Ireland and a total of 300,000 such homes across the United Kingdom. That has generated more impetus due to the ongoing government debate in Northern Ireland. The Technology Strategy Board is to invest £4.5 million to stimulate significant cuts in carbon dioxide emissions from existing homes. Its aim is to allow consortia to radically improve its retrofit products to bring about greater take-up in the market.

The primary objectives of the project are to achieve a 60% reduction in monitored annual energy costs in heating and electricity; the usage of a package of measures with a total average payback period of five years; and on-site delivery that is 25% quicker, with an improvement in both quality and health and safety performance. A consortium has been formed to establish the best solution to improving the Housing Executive's no-fines concrete stock of some 5,000 dwellings through the use of external insulation to improve the dwellings' thermal efficiency.

The issue relating to no-fines stock seized my attention when I first became aware of it. I asked the Housing Executive earlier this year to urgently develop such a programme for all houses of that particular construction, prioritising those properties that are most in need. The project, which is due to start in a matter of a week or so, will look at providing external insulation to seven no-fines properties in Antrim. The outcome will be to provide a new policy for energy-improvement measures for this type of construction. It is hoped that that solution can be rolled out across the United

Kingdom, where there are over 300,000 such properties.

The project, called S-IMPLER, has four aims: increasing occupant understanding of retrofit health and financial benefits; reducing solid wall housing retrofit costs; developing building information modelling; and generating monitoring data on actual building performance. The solutions to be considered will be coordinated by the Housing Executive's in-house no-fines working group.

I also propose to visit some homes in Germany next month to see at first hand how the successes achieved there in tackling such issues might be used here in Northern Ireland.

The Housing Executive has advised me that a retrofit scheme in Loanda Crescent, Newry, is at the planning stage. That will evaluate other means of retrofitting different environmental standards and contribute to the overall no-fines strategy.

Regarding cavity wall insulation, a recent report from the University of Ulster, Jordanstown, that was commissioned by a commercial entity, which, I might add, has a commercial interest in the manufacture and supply of blown beads, suggested that there may be a problem in some dwellings where mineral wool or fibre-based insulation was installed. The report suggested that, where blown fibre has been provided, the fibre settles in the cavity owing to insufficient insulation being installed at the right pressure, that is, not to British Board of Agrément (BBA) standards. The university report dealt only with fibre-based insulation and resulted from desktop research and an examination of one property. It recommended further extensive studies on the issue, which I think were necessary.

The South Eastern Regional College undertook that further work, based on the report, and inspected 100 properties, including owner-occupied, Housing Association and Housing Executive stock, with the same result. The report noted that the problems are historical, dating back to insulation schemes of the 1980s and 1990s, and can be attributed to factors such as inadequate insulation being pumped into the cavity; insulation being pumped at an inadequate pressure; poor workmanship and supervision; and inspection methods in the 1980s and 1990s not being as advanced as today.

The Housing Executive therefore decided to commission its own research into the area to undertake a minimum of 300 technical surveys

of its dwellings. Those surveys, which are being carried out by the South Eastern Regional College, because it won the tender, should determine whether the cavities have blown fibre, loose bead, bonded bead, insulation board or other, and identify the current condition of the insulation. The surveys began in October 2013 and will complete in March 2014. Until they are complete, the Housing Executive has no way of knowing whether there is a wider problem with cavity insulation and, if that is the case, the extent of it. The Housing Executive will obviously carry out an evaluation of the results to determine whether there is substandard insulation in its properties and will develop whatever action plan is indicated with new strategies and policies.

It should also be noted that this is not an issue that is unique to Housing Executive stock or, indeed, to Northern Ireland. Failure of insulation types, if confirmed, would affect all housing tenures and apply throughout the UK.

At the same time, some properties in north Down have been included in an external cyclical maintenance scheme and will have their cavity insulation checked. The consultant has been briefed, and insulation survey results are anticipated in mid-December.

As we take this matter forward, which I decided to make a priority some time ago, it is important, as I am sure Members will agree, that any progress that is made or any actions or initiatives that are taken are evidence-based and that it is imperative, therefore, that we carry out the sort of research that I indicated is being carried out. It would be possible to move forward on the basis of anecdotes, stories that we have heard or individual experiences that we have had, but it is important that we get some good, solid information to provide a basis for moving forward.

To summarise, with the ever-increasing cost of fuel in Northern Ireland, I am absolutely committed to doing all that I possibly can to ensure that social houses are insulated to a high standard to significantly improve thermal comfort for tenants and their families and to help to address fuel poverty.

There have been considerable improvements over recent years. Just last week, I visited some new homes that are just being completed in the Village area of south Belfast. We spoke to the residents already living in those homes to get their account of the difference that the energy efficiency measures have made. It was a bitterly cold day when we were there, and

when I came in out of the cold, I was certainly impressed to feel the warmth in those homes. I have also taken the opportunity to see some retrofit schemes across in GB, and the impact of those on the energy efficiency of homes was truly remarkable. The anecdotal evidence from the tenants, over a period of a few months, was that the installation had caused no real disruption to them at all and that the difference to the energy efficiency of the home was remarkable.

4.45 pm

I want to pick up on a few points that Members raised. In spite of all that I have outlined, Dolores Kelly spoke about some dissatisfaction with the progress that has been made. We have boiler replacement, the warm homes scheme, double glazing, retrofitting and the area-based approach, and a number of those initiatives only started in recent years. If there is dissatisfaction with what I am doing, I am sure that she is equally dissatisfied with the work that was done in previous years or, in some cases, had not been done by my predecessors.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Minister give way?

Mr McCausland: I have to decline that approach because I want to make a number of points.

Danny Kinahan spoke about delay in the installation of double glazing. That was due to the fact that one company took out an injunction against the way that the Housing Executive was dealing with the matter. That has now been resolved. We are now back on track, and we will be able to meet our target of having all Housing Executive properties double-glazed by 2015. He asked whether there were savings to be made because of changes in the way that the windows are installed. Yes, there are bound to be savings because you avoid the problem of having to pay redecoration grants, except in a limited number of cases, because of the way that the windows are installed, which is exactly the same manner in which the windows would be installed in my home or the home of any other person around this Chamber.

There was a certain amount of begrudgery in his contribution, and, in some cases, I think that he was speaking in code, because I was not clear what he was talking about. He referred to the Kirklees model. I am sure that the Member will be pleased to hear this, because it is obviously news to him: we are taking forward an area-based approach in partnership with

local councils and spearheaded by the excellent research and work that we commissioned with the Housing Executive from Professor Christine Liddell of the University of Ulster. That is about the evidence-based approach that we need to have moving forward. The area-based approach is one of our more innovative approaches and one that will certainly pay off in the longer term.

Stewart Dickson asked whether we can check any evidence that insulation material is substandard and that installers did not do a proper job. The Housing Executive carries out substantial checks on work that is undertaken. It is perhaps not as complete as I would like, but maintenance officers have been retrained, and inspections are now much more comprehensive than they might have been previously. The Member will welcome that.

Dolores Kelly made a point about the Mount Eagles residents and the problem with inappropriate and ineffective installation. I will certainly ensure, moving forward, that any review will look at all elements of insulation, including standards of materials used. We want to deal with the issue as comprehensively and effectively as possible, and the sort of initiatives that we have been bringing forward — boiler replacement, warm homes, the area-based approach through Professor Liddell, the double-glazing, the retrofitting — all show that we are taking a holistic approach to the issue of energy efficiency.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Could the Minister please bring his remarks to a close.

Mr McCausland: We want to see good practice, and the progress that we have made is extremely encouraging and appreciated by the people who are the beneficiaries.

Mr Agnew: I welcome the debate and, indeed, the consensus across the Chamber in support of the motion and the amendment. I have to say that I welcome the Minister's closing comments: his commitment to the evidence-based approach, the area-based approach and the work with Professor Liddell. The Kirklees model is certainly something that my party is proud of. We had a strong presence on the council that implemented that scheme. It is a model of good practice that we can look to and try to emulate. It was ultimately the basis of the green new deal proposals, which, unfortunately, were rejected. However, from a lot of what the Minister says, it sounds as though his Department might be taking forward some of that work under a different name. I am not

wedded to the name; I am very conscious that, in Northern Ireland, anything with "green" in the title — including the name of my own party — can sometimes prove divisive.

However, I recommend to the Minister approaches other than those which his Department is taking. For example, today I met up with a cooperative called Futureproof NI, which I advised to contact his Department. The cooperative presented to me a proposed pilot retrofit in Moyle which, it believes, could be funded for around £250,000 a year. Those approaches can and should be looked at and, where local people and companies have the initiative to take forward some of that work, we should, if their business case stacks up, support them how we can.

I made reference before — and I will try not to go around the world again, Mr McCann — to Finland. Finland and Scandinavia in general have been mentioned by a number of Members. Again, it comes back to the evidence base. They have 100% cavity wall insulation, 100% loft insulation, 100% floor insulation and 100% double glazing. The evidence is there that winter-related deaths are lower, per head of population, than in Northern Ireland despite much colder temperatures. There is absolutely no doubt that better, more energy-efficient housing leads to better outcomes for those who live in it.

In the discussion across the Chamber between me and Mr Campbell the Member for East Londonderry, by a strange act of goodwill, he agreed with me. It is not actually his first time, though he said that it may be the only time that it has happened here. I believe that he did it once on 'The Stephen Nolan Show' as well. So embarrassed is he that he has left the Chamber.

However, we do have various schemes: the boiler replacement schemes, the double-glazing scheme, the warm homes scheme and the NISEP. We should look at ways in which we can bring together that funding into a pool, and look at deep retrofitting on an area-based approach, because double-glazed windows in a house that does not have cavity wall insulation will in themselves be ineffective; and boiler replacement in a home that does not have other insulation will be ineffective. It is only when you bring those measures together that you get genuine energy efficiency and the true benefits to the homeowner.

We must go further than simply the Housing Executive stock and, as others mentioned, the social rented sector, and, indeed, privately

owned homes. We have to treat this as part of our public infrastructure and look to get to the level where Finland is, where we have 100% of the aforementioned insulation and energy efficiency measures in place across our housing stock, because we all move houses and, ultimately, we are all the responsibility of this Government. Fuel poverty, at 44%, goes beyond the social housing sector or just the lowest paid. It runs throughout our society, into all income brackets and housing tenures, and it has to be an issue that we tackle.

Ms P Bradley: As we approach winter, our thoughts turn to heating our homes and the cost that we will incur in that. We already know that those on low and fixed incomes are often hit proportionately harder by the onset of cold weather than the rest of society. I congratulate the Department on the work that it has already done to try to address fuel poverty in line with the Programme for Government.

As well as addressing the financial side, it is imperative that we ensure that when people heat their homes, they get the full benefit from the heat, and, in turn, the most heat for the least amount of money. People on low incomes are more likely to be on the higher tariffs of pay-as-you-go meters. Those are, rightly, designed to prevent them from amassing large bills, but they are not always the most economic way to heat a home. Therefore, it is imperative that the heat that they pay for stays in their home and does not filter out through uninsulated walls or lofts. As my colleague Mr Easton highlighted, it is a worrying fact that people aged 75 and over are most likely not to have full cavity wall insulation and most likely to have zero insulation. Those living in low-income households, in which every penny is likely to count, are also at higher risk of having no wall insulation.

I am pleased to note the research that shows that it is not all doom and gloom. The Department has made improvements to loft insulation and double glazing in Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes, which is no doubt helping those on low incomes. We must strive to further that good work and ensure that the materials used are of a good standard and fit for purpose. Studies have indicated that insulation is beneficial but that efficiency is not the only factor. The materials used have to be of the best quality and affordable: loft insulation, for example, must be of a certain thickness. The Department also has a duty to the public to ensure that such materials are value for money and, where possible, environmentally sustainable. That is a big ask,

but I am confident that the Minister can lead his Department in delivering it.

I now turn my attention briefly to what other Members had to say. Mr Alex Easton, in proposing the motion, said, quite rightly, that insulation was only the tip of the iceberg. I want to put on record my thanks to Alex, who brought the issue to my attention some time ago. I had always known about the poor quality of insulation in homes in Northern Ireland because of the number of people calling to my office and because of my home as well, but Alex brought me some really hard evidence showing that it is a massive problem for all sectors in Northern Ireland. Alex also highlighted the link between cold homes and the lack of insulation. He said that it was clear that that was why our homes were so cold. He stated that investing in cavity wall insulation would have a massive impact on people's lives, socially and economically. What better time to reduce fuel poverty by showing leadership and supporting the motion and amendment?

Mr Agnew, in moving his amendment, spoke of the increasing cost of energy. He said that there are more winter deaths in Northern Ireland than in Finland, even though the temperature there is much lower. He also stated that housing infrastructure is in a much worse state than our roads and yet we spend more on roads than on housing. He said that the materials used should complement the owner's health to ensure that there are no adverse effects for people with respiratory disease. I agree. Also important to me is biodiversity. He spoke well about that and said that biodiversity should be considered in products for the future.

Mr McCann spoke in support of the motion and highlighted the fact that we should also look at other sectors, including housing associations. He said that we should not forget the thousands of homes purchased by developers. That gives serious grounds for concern. I agree with Mr McCann that it is not solely the tenant's fault. I, like him, have been to homes where I have been told that it is the tenant's fault because they have not opened their windows. I have seen children's bedrooms, living rooms and other rooms covered in spores of mould. It is not always the tenant's fault, and it should not be laid at their feet.

Mrs Kelly is absolutely right that this is, as she put it, a "no-brainer". She, like Mr McCann, brought to our attention the Mount Eagles issue and said that it needed to be given serious attention. She also made the very good point that energy efficiency should be holistic. There

is no point in doing one thing and not another; it must be all-encompassing.

Mr Kinahan praised his local housing association for its work. He highlighted the fact that many homes remain in fuel poverty. He strongly supported the boiler replacement scheme, and I agree with him. If only that had come in some time ago, we would be in a better place now. He also highlighted the fact that we have to find a balance between environmental issues and value for money, and I think that everyone is agreed on that.

5.00 pm

Mr Stewart Dickson questioned why housing that is just 10 years old should have such poor cavity wall insulation, and he called into question the workmanship and inspections on those properties. He is absolutely right. He also said that we still have a long way to go on the issue.

Mr Campbell said that fuel poverty has come to the fore because of the increase in fuel prices. He said that we should possibly endeavour to replicate successful schemes in other countries. He brought up the issue of NISEP and its value, and then he and Mr Agnew had a little debate between themselves. We could feel the warmth and the love in the Chamber, which was very welcome. I am glad that Mr Agnew mentioned that he had agreed with you one other time in the past, so that is good. There has been agreement twice, so we have made lots of progress there. He also commended the Minister on the steps that he has taken over the years but said that we will need to go further to support vulnerable people in our community.

Mr Brady talked about the success of the warm homes scheme and the boiler replacement scheme. He said that more needs to be done and that we cannot leave it at that. He talked about the difficulties with older houses in rural areas. He made the important point that it does not matter how well insulated your home is if you do not have the money to put oil in the tank. If that is the case, what good is it to you? He also said that you cannot divorce poverty from fuel poverty, which is extremely true.

I also thank the Minister. He gave examples of recent developments from his Department. I believe that he is committed to doing everything that he can to ensure that all social homes are insulated to the very highest standard.

In a modern Northern Ireland, we have a moral and ethical obligation to ensure that the most vulnerable people in our society do not have to

make the stark choice between food and heat. Food is as important to maintaining body temperature as heat is. By helping to combat fuel poverty, we will have an impact on services such as the health service as people, hopefully, will be less at risk from illness caused by poor diet or the cold. This is a classic example of how spending in one Department can cut costs in another, and I am delighted and glad that the Minister has shown leadership in ensuring that his Department is doing everything possible to ensure that it is helping the most vulnerable people in our society. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, as the largest provider of social housing, should also be leading the way in such matters by ensuring that houses are heated well and that the housing stock will last longer. That is a win-win situation for all involved.

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

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister for Social Development to initiate a review of the range of insulation materials used in Housing Executive homes, to assess the heat retention properties of the materials used and to ensure that they are environmentally sustainable and provide value for money over their lifespan.

Adjourned at 5.03 pm.



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